

# The Reactive

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# Abstract

Lindanathi Mda works a dead end job at a video store and runs an operation selling ARV's with his friends, Carmichael and Linireaux. He is tormented by the memory of having contributed to his younger brother Luthando's death. He lives a life of evasion, taking drugs and a substance called Industrial in Cape Town's suburbs, until he receives a message from Bhut' Vuyo, Luthando's step-father, which reminds him of a promise he made to their family eight years ago. While old wounds resurface, Lindanathi is faced with the decision of continuing a life of evasion or returning home and facing the responsibility that comes with everything he left behind. 'The Reactive' is a novel that seeks to explore the implications of an increasingly technologized society coming to a head with more traditionally based ideas of place and identity, as well as the idea of forming a 'self' based on an unreliable memory, and a continually compromised process of mentation, due to the proliferation of ephemeral media forms and chemical abuse.

# The Reactive

Masande Ntshanga

**Ten years ago**, I helped a handful of men take my little brother's life. I wasn't there when it happened, but I told Luthando where he could find them. He was only about seventeen, back then, broad of shoulder, and known as a wimp at his local high school. He was bad with girls, had the lousy luck of every Mda guy in our family except our father, who'd thrown us into different wombs at the ends of 1986 and '7. So I guess it was winter when LT went up there to set things straight for himself. They had him in a line with some guys he'd shared a class with in the high-school. Then they took out their blades, nursed him a week, and he kicked and swore at them for another two. He was due out not another two days, they later told us, and they called him the screamer, too, when we gathered to put him inside the Earth. It was meant with tenderness. They'd walked into his hut when he'd failed to make his funny sounds, one day. The sky had been an empty blue expanse, easy on their duties around uziko, and they'd missed him for his queer fussiness. So they'd walked in there, one after the other, and found a memory instead of the man they were out to make. That was my little brother, dead at seventeen, and I've never forgotten it was me who put you there, LT.

**I never went back home after we buried him.** This isn't a story about me and my brother from the Transkei, about the Mda boys from eMthatha or the village of Zeleni, where my grandmother's bones lie polished and buried next to her Ma's. Instead, I want to tell you about what happened to me in Cape Town after Luthando had taken his death. It's where I went to school and tried to make

something of myself. It's also where I began to reconsider what my hands had made and it won't take us very long.

**I went to tertiary twice in my life.** I might as well begin with how things went for me, there. I attended the university in Rondebosch, which is just up the road from the main, where I dropped out of a journalism degree, and then for the second time I enrolled myself at the Technikon in town, where I got my science diploma and my sickness. In each case, I was enrolled under an equity scholarship, since there were plenty of those to go around, back then. I got through on mostly average grades, like most students at the time, but I filled out all the forms they required of boys who had my skin tone. It didn't take much to go to school for free, back then, or as free as having the pigment they required of us was, in any case, and so that's what I set out to do. I think I did more or less alright. In the end, I got my science diploma and I have that sitting somewhere in my flat in Obs. I'm also still brown of skin tone, the last time I checked myself in the mirror I had, there.

**Now what else?** I also spent about half a year at Bhut' Vuyo's place. Two weeks after dropping out of school I couldn't set foot inside my own home. The way this happened, there could've been tapestries of fire falling over each of our six walls, that Thursday. That's how barred I was. It was too soon, my mother said, and so she arranged

for me to enter the home of a distant relative instead. Bhut' Vuyo was cast to me as a friendly middle-aged man who'd taken up a home on the West Coast, and he was known as a great mechanic, a recovering alcoholic, and a doting step father to the little brother I'd killed. Sticking his hands into rusting bonnets had taken him to Okinawa as a man of only twenty years, and then around to the city of Kyoto on a Toyota scholarship at twenty-four, before he'd come back and accepted too many drinks on the house in a tavern called Silver's. There were decades that chased him after that, with Bhut' Vuyo barely standing on his two feet on street corners in Mdantsane, his toes busting through the smiles on his black and blue gum boots, while his head lolled as wispy as an old hornet's nest on his neck. My mother told me then that Bhut' Vuyo now lived with his second wife in Du Noon, and that between them they'd had three small children. My aunt had passed shortly after we'd buried her son Luthando, she'd had a cancer eating her throat that had grown impatient with the onset of her grief, and it had taken her down just in time to sidestep the years of her husband's dissolution. It was a punishment for me to be sent there by my parent, I knew that even then, but thinking of my brother Luthando, I made myself welcome to taking it. My mother had felt disgraced by my decision to leave the university and my degree in Rondebosch, and so I went to Du Noon like she wanted me to and I ended up staying there for another six months. I suppose some things happened when I was out there and I ended up drawing close to the folks who'd taken me in. Luthando came up as I thought he would, and in my gratitude, I made a promise to Bhut' Vuyo and his home. Now, eight years later, I receive a text message from him that reminds me of the words we'd shared on my last night there in Du Noon. Bhut' Vuyo reminds me of the promise I'd made to him and his household all of eight years ago.

## First Part



**So here's how this goes.** When I kill the first kid on the rugby field, the first thought that goes through my head, besides having to consciously release the trigger, is that somehow this isn't so bad. I mean it's awful how the bullet, we've got a clip of half-jacketed hollow point, shatters his skull just above the ear and he falls down, his blood splashing, and his hair fluttering, and I think to myself, after all, Harriet Tubman is also dead. Then Carmichael peers over my shoulder and looking down at the blood sinking into the ant filled grass, he says to me, nice headshot. Then Lini says part of the reason she hates her mother so much is because she's the world's biggest liberalist cunt. She says, this woman, she should've raised me a racist and given me a side. She says, now I'm nothing. Then she takes the gun from my hands and carelessly shoots another kid in the throat. I guess this one happens to be a lock. Or at least that's how high he jumps, anyway. His throat tapers out winglets of flesh and all three of us have to shut our eyes against the blood. Then I step forward and say to my friends how I don't know. I say to them, do you think this will work? Lini hands me the gun and takes her shoes off. She smiles faintly when the green grass spikes her between her toes and I guess this is what killing for the government is like. The gun is slicked all over with sweat, and every time I blink, I see the world through a prism of blood. Then another kid falls and Carmichael bends over his bleeding head and asks, why us though? He says if they're so good at killing, then why don't they do it themselves? So I tell him this isn't so much killing as it's cleaning up a mess. I tell him it's no more than digging up graves. To Carmichael, I say, these kids, all of them, they're already dead. Then Lini says it's eerie and we ask her, what is? So she says gunshots with no sirens. Then Carmichael and I look up at her through the sound of today's rising traffic. This is our friend, Linireaux. She opens her mouth as if

to say something further, but when her lips close again to round off one of her usual remarks, that's when I wake up.

**It's been no longer than ten years.** That's how long Luthando's been decomposing or turning into a powder inside the Earth. I rub my hand over my face and spend another minute looking at my cell phone. Then I close my eyes and try for sleep, again, but nothing mushrooms inside my head.

**So I guess here's my name, first.** My parents got it from a girl, and what it is is Lindanathi. It means wait with us, and what I'm meant to be waiting for, as well as who I'm meant to be waiting with, I was never given the clues. My whole life, ever since I could spell its letters out, I've been trying to make it shorter into Nathi. You could take that as a hint if you want, at least during the length of our story, although I doubt it would make much of a difference to me at this point. To speak of stories, by the way, the way this one starts could be anywhere, I guess, and right now, I admit that it's kind of everywhere, and also, I admit that's how things are for me, right now. Here's an example if you want. I've been out of a solid job, now, for about four years, and it's in the last month of my severance pay that Lini, who's just showered and burnt her hand on the broken sandwich grill, comes to sit next to me on her bed and asks me if I ever really consider what happens the second I die. This is how things are for

us, like I said, and Linireaux, with her hair dripping and the smell of Pick 'N Pay pine conditioner fuming off her pale scalp, dark spots of moisture form on my job mail paper and I tell her how I don't. I say to Lini how thoughts like that would've never allowed for what happened to have happened, and she listens to me with her head tilted before she says okay. Then she leans into my chest and closes her eyes to fall asleep, and with everything silent and her apartment feeling like an old tomb around us, I bend to touch her on the part of her finger that's dying. Then, with her eyes still closed, Lini raises her hand and sticks the finger inside my mouth. Sliding it slowly over the length of my tongue, she tells me to suck the skin on it back to life.

**One of the biggest problems** Linireaux has with me, she says, is that I never pay attention. For every shoulder I offer for someone to cry on, my biggest concern isn't their problem, but the snot their leave drying on my shirt. One time, it starts raining outside when she gets up half-naked from the mattress we sometimes share. I haven't had the occasion to argue with her about this, and it's close to midnight when the room cloaks itself in complete darkness. Five minutes later, I join her on the floor and the two of us remain awake and quiet until the morning. Then, before Lini gets up to shower, she says to me I look at the time a lot when people speak their problems to me.

**Still, these days**, for what passes as my social life, all you have to do is just look at these two, my friends Linireaux and Carmichael. The first one, Lini, she tells me to do something with my life and live it positively. I tell her she's twenty-seven, her brother died of AIDS when she was sixteen, she should stop having a new cut on her arms for everyday of the week. Then here's my other friend, Carmichael, and he says even adoption isn't a mercy call, what it is is suicide. It gets to the point where you're afraid of your kids and they don't even remember your name. He's lost faith in what Lini calls humanity's version of our humanity. So these days, he loses himself in internet fantasies, where the way to kill a monster is to either give it a potion of health, or cast on it a spell of life, this re-routed reality where life is not only the mirror side to death, but also its catalyst. This is Carmichael, and what you'll learn first about him is probably never to believe anything he says. Then what you'll learn second is that whenever he's high, he'll tell you how his first near death experience was a download. Carmichael, when you meet him and he's probably coming down, what he'll tell you is that since he's started using Glomail nutrients, they've been coming down more often than ever. These are what Carmichael will call his birds. If you listen to him, he'll tell you how these pigeons, travelling all the way down from the Philippines, they'll stop off at Maine first, and then they'll be on his windowsill in Seapoint. To listen to him speak, he'll tell you how he was an asthmatic and introverted laaitie when he was growing up, and that what he knows about bird migrations, it isn't from taking a lot of museum trips. Carmichael, if you listen to him long enough, he'll tell you how much this means to him, but right now, at this point in the story, I don't quite feel like telling the truth about Carmichael and his fig tree. I don't quite feel like telling the

truth about Carmichael and his fig tree and what he does with it. So I go back to the sopping red rugby field I have in my dreams.

**This morning**, when I open my eyes, I find another warm Saturday wrapping itself around the peninsula. It's been about three hours since I received my message from Bhut' Vuyo, and outside, the sky seems geared up for another humid weekend over this city. Where we are is Newlands, over at Lini's place, and I suppose the situation is easy enough to explain with the three of us. It's a fairly long stretch of time before I die, but not too long after I receive the message from my uncle, and everything happens the way it usually does between me and my friends. Like always, the three of us, that's Carmichael, Linireaux and myself, we wake up some time before noon and take two Ibuprofens each. Then we go back to sleep, wake up an hour later, and take another two from the 800 milligram case. Then Lini starts up the stove to cook up the last vat of glue she has in her flat, and the way we are, here, the date is sometime in August, and the three of us, we've just gotten through with our morning showers. Since I'm always the last to walk out of Lini's bathroom, leaving behind me a string of waxed paper floss floating inside her toilet bowl, I lean my head out and find Carmichael watching her from the other end of the kitchen, lighting up incense sticks and placing them on the counter to cover up the smell of glue wafting out from the oven. The way I'm just standing here, by the way, it's me dripping pipe-rusted water all over Lini's chipped wooden threshold, and when I take a look at her back, she has the only dry towel in the flat wrapped around her waist. Lini sees me and throws me a dishcloth I

can use to dry myself off with, and even though it's stupid of me to catch it, that's what I do, and before I can say anything in protest, she asks me if I can't see what she's busy doing, right now. Lini, she asks me if I can't see how she's being the biggest breadwinner to ever pay the rent on time on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of this damn building.

Since she's right, I nod.

So I take the cloth from her and do my neck before I go behind my ears. Inside the bathroom, again, I pull on a pair of shorts and find a dry shirt inside the hamper. It belongs to Lini, but it fits me just fine so I use it. I pat my hair with the cloth before I hang it on the shower rail to dry. Then, after I step out, I walk around her and open the kitchen windows for air. I unbolt each latch on the front door and step out and lean over the balcony on the landing. There, leaning back and looking in from the railing, I watch Lini wiping her brow with a sigh. I watch her oozing brown goo from a wooden ladle and into a yellow porcelain bowl.

Everything moves slow, today.

It matches the heat and I close my eyes.

I try not to think about Bhut' Vuyo's message.

I try not to think about everything I've had to put away about LT. Instead, I think about how it's the weekend, again, today.

I focus my thoughts on the next 48 hours.

It's the weekend and I guess this is what passes for what the three of us do on these days. Sitting inside the living room, just a few paces behind Lini, Carmichael opens his laptop and starts up the printer set up on Lini's coffee table. He feeds paper into the machine and watches as the computer boots up with its usual cartoony sound, a noise Carmichael likes to call Bill Gates slipping on the condom he uses on the free market. He says it again and Lini and I shrug.

He gets like that, sometimes.

In any case, it will have to do.

The way I'm standing here, I push my thoughts underneath that sound. My one friend in the living room and the other inside the kitchen, I guess you could call this our operation, our own way of making a living in this place, here in Cape Town, where we stay.

Of course, first you'll have to meet Lini, like before.

She acts as our chemist.

To cook glue like Lini does, you need flour, sugar and only a small amount of vinegar. You need to pour all three of these into a bowl, add a cup of water, and then mix them thoroughly, making sure to squash out all the lumps from the flour. Then you need to bring the bowl to a boil, have the oven preheated at 180, and keep stirring it with a spoon for texture. What helps, of course, is to be as patient and attentive as Linireaux is when she's working on something.

Then there's my other friend.

His name is Carmichael.

He acts as our printer.

To print out as much ink as Carmichael does, you need to buy regular 60 XL ink cartridges from every second hand computer shop you can find in the city. To do this, you need to wear a rented suit and pretend to be ordering stock for a start-up broadband company somewhere in the banking district. Supply a name and number, pay for the purchase in credit, and leave with at least half a dozen 60XL's. Then, back home, print until every cartridge is at half capacity, and then steam each one open, reach inside and loosen the doctor blades above their chemical toners. Report these as defects to the manufacturer and bring the invoice to the shop to collect another half-dozen. Then tell them business is going really well and that you've recommended their service to a number of your own clients. Emphasize that none of them are anything less than

national. Then repeat this with different establishments, and what helps, of course, is to know when to lie as often and as easily as Carmichael does.

From outside Lini's flat, with my phone still in my hand, I watch him as Carmichael leans his head back on her couch. He's got a five 'o clock shadow running down half the length of his throat and his Adam's apple bobs up and down as the machine chugs, pulling in reams of paper ready for all the ink he's defrauded from the clerks here in Cape Town

Then, finally, I suppose you'll have to meet me

I'm Lindanathi Mda, and of the three of us, I'm the one who's supposed to be dying. To do as much standing around as I do, you need to be one of the 40 million humans infected with the immunodeficiency virus, this year. Then you need to sit at your friend's computer and design a poster about how you can help each of these people out. You need to tell them how you can make it so it's living with the virus instead of dying from it, and then you need to provide your details so you can sell them all your pills. You need to tell them you prefer email and what helps, at least for me, is if you try to forget it as much as I do.

I mean, you can try.

I still do, anyway.

Maybe it's this whole slavery thing, Lini says to us.

I press the reply button on my cell phone, but my fingers pause and I can't type anything out. For a moment, I just stare at the blinking cursor, and then I look up and Lini's stirring in another ladle of water into the glue. Like most mornings, she's left her braids rolled up in a neat ball at the top of her head. It's a new style the three of us have started to favour more and more from her, and the way she's standing there, with a few of the strands loosening themselves and



falling limply across her chest, she flicks them away from the hotplates in a single shake from her shoulder, and watching her do this is one way of accessing her character, I guess. Lini's always had a way of making the smallest things obey her, and that's including myself and Carmichael.

I sort of smile at this and pocket my phone.

I take my eyes back to her.

These days, look at Lini and she's always wearing a different pack of synthetic hair. Sometimes the colour she chooses is black, and at other times it's a blue shade, and at other times it's a colour I couldn't describe for you. It's silver or aqua. Carmichael and I, we've seen her in the red and blonde ones a lot. She wears them on her head all day and all of them, she tells us, they're more flammable than a wick dipped inside paraffin. Lini, she tells us that if we want, we should think of her as a human match, that Carmichael and I should imagine her having a dormant fire inside her brains, which I think is a nice way of telling people not to fuck with you. Or at least the most colourful one I've heard from us three so far. Still looking at her, I place a hand where I feel my cell phone's weight against my thigh. Then letters jumble in and out of my head as I try and think of what to write. I lean back on the balcony and breathe for composure.

This is what the rest of the day looks like from my head, by the way. It's mostly nondescript, and yet still, somewhere inside it, Bhut' Vuyo and his immense bulk sit and wait for my reply.

I turn around and look out over the courtyard.

The weather's warm and almost cloudless. Spring stalls from just a month away, but the rays already warm up my skin like geyser water, throwing thin beams that dapple light across the red and empty corridors up here on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

So this is Carmichael and I squatting.

Inside this vast city, wherever my uncle Bhut' Vuyo might be, this is Carmichael and I spending our past few nights somewhere between falling asleep and overdosing on Lini's sectional couch. Lini's building, an unattractive cream-coloured six-story called West Ridge Heights, was converted from an old nursing home in the late 1980's. Now it sits tucked away in the docile suburb of Newlands, just a few streets off the main road, and could be either of the two holes Carmichael and I have chosen to call our homes, this year. Or just for this winter, if you want to take him up on his view of things. In any case, this is where Lini sets up her pad and cooks up glue for the three of us. You can take a look at it and it has the usual overgrown grass, the usual stained ceilings and the usual smudged lino in its single elevator lobby. There's a tile missing here and there, with a broken full length mirror and plastic potted plants leaning back in most of its corners, almost appearing wilted, and there's almost no security to speak of. Then down below, on the ground floor and inside a small courtyard, there's a young girl who plays by herself each time Carmichael and I come over here to crash. She builds cities with loose pieces of concrete from the broken water fountain, and when I wave at her on days like this when I'm around with Carmichael, she looks up and stares at me with these huge, oval eyes. Then she runs back under the awning and disappears into places I can't imagine from up here on the 4<sup>th</sup>.

In any case, between these brief encounters and our stares, I've since learnt her name is Ethelia.

From inside, I hear Lini talking to us, again.

I'm being serious, she says.

She goes, look, just think about this thing for a moment.

So I guess this is us.

The three of us, what we're doing is having one of our talks about what to do for Last Life, again. Last Life is what we've decided to come up with to describe what happens to me during my last year here on Earth. Me and these two, my friends Carmichael and Lini, we've stayed up for most of the previous night with this question. We finished the wine, first, and then we emptied out the benzene canisters, and finally we broke into the Ibuprofen Lini likes to pop whenever she pretends she can suffer from actual period pains. Every other time, she tells us she was spared from the woes of women born to this planet, and usually, the three of us take our painkillers in the mornings, anyway. I could really use another one, right now, I think to myself without moving.

Then I look up from my cell phone.

My mouth feels just a level down from blow dried.

So explain this slavery thing to me, Carmichael says.

He takes a thin book from the counter and flops himself down on a bean bag inside the lounge. Like always, Carmichael starts reading the book, it's a copy of *A Happy Death* by Albert Camus, from the back, his eyes training the sentences outward and then inward, as if the French author had written a Japanese manga.

Then this is when Lini says her word to us, again.

To us, she says, slavery.

Then she raises her hand and waves the gooey ladle in a small circle above her bowl, and when her head drops down to look over at her tiles, I look up and catch Carmichael stashing away a grin. We can both tell he's been spared from the reach of Lini's anger, at least for now, and that she's thought better of flicking a gob of glue at his face. Instead, she drops the spoon in the basin and wipes her hands slowly down her towel.

She sighs.

You know what I mean, Car. She turns to face him where he's slouching in front of the coffee table. The three of us, Linireaux says, we're all basically slaves.

Myself, I remain quiet.

I just watch.

I feel my grip starting to grow clammy around my cell phone.

I mean, really, now.

It's usually Carmichael who brings us all this pathos.

The way we live, now, the three of us, that's Carmichael, Linireaux and myself, we aren't so much slaves as we're this trio of slogans from the national ad campaign. Just like everyone else, we've been given our parts to play in the rainbow nation's ongoing drama, and if you've never met us, then we've been written about as the born-frees. Or scribbled below by lines and blog dates as millennials, or what have you, the white browns and yellow blacks and gossamer greens supposedly born indifferent to race, raised on cornflakes and apple meringues, on the new flag, pinning the tail on the donkey, hth chlorine, cupcakes, spit-roasts, dial-up modems and maids dressed in starched gingham tunics.

Then other things like that.

Everything my little brother Luthando never got to have.

The boomerangs and the rollerblades and the space goo.

I remember him topless in his cut-offs and thin silver chain, instead. Soft as he was, Luthando always thought himself a township ou. Umjita. That's what he played at in the summers we two met. He didn't know what a top was before I gave him mine. Then we tried to use the laces from his Taylors as a string.

Still in the kitchen, Lini tries to drive in her point.

She tells us that babies cry because birth is the first form of human incarceration. She stirs the glue and tells us that it's a shock

to the consciousness to be imprisoned inside the human body's flesh. That human flesh is something that's meant to go off from the beginning, it has a date, which makes it an ill fit, since the consciousness, naturally amorphous, is antithetical to a system of disintegration.

Myself, I've never thought LT was still around.

So maybe it's because my body's breaking down that she's speaking like this. I couldn't tell you. Maybe it's her own body that she feels is fading away. It could be everyone's body.

In any case, I walk back in and take the spoon from Linireaux. She gives me a mock head butt with her match head, and sighing with relief, Lini sits up on the counter and lights up her first cigarette of the day. She closes her eyes to suck in the carcinogens, and from behind his book, Carmichael tells us we aren't selling enough pills. Of course, this isn't news for any of us.

I tell him that my case manager said she'd give me a call, today. I tell Carmichael that for months now, my insurers, I think they've been holding out on me, actually.

So this is when he sits up

He says, Jesus, dude, Nathi, don't tell me they've started reviewing your case. Then he pulls his computer over his lap and tells me, quick, dude, gooi me her name and email, quick.

I guess this is Carmichael's solution for most of our problems. Mention something to him and he asks you for a computer and a name. Right now, I shrug at him because I don't have either one handy. I guess I could find out, I say to him.

Then I keep stirring.

I tell myself that's what's important.

I wipe my brow like I've been watching Linireaux do all morning, and when I look up, I find her with her eyes closed on the

kitchen counter. She leans back against the top shelf, blowing out a pair of slow smoke rings, and when her hand drops to ash the last of her cigarette, she says it again, this word she's been using on us all morning, about how the three of us are slaves. There's something in the way she says it this time that makes me finally take out my cell phone, again. I don't stop stirring, but I hold my breath. The text is only a line long and I suppose it says what it should. Lindanathi, my uncle Vuyo writes, ukhulile ngoku, you've come of age. He tells me I should come home and I read that a while before I delete the text. The relief I anticipated doesn't come over me. Instead, I remember and recite each word. Then I think of coming of age in the way he's meant it. I think of my last night in Du Noon. Then I think of the two words, ukhulile ngoku, and of coming of age, once more.

**My case manager calls my cell phone** close to an hour later. We've put away Lini's cooked glue in plastic trays to cool off in the freezer, and we've taken what's left of the tube of Industrial glue she keeps in her drawer up our noses. It's now just a little after one p.m., and the way we're lying down, here, sprawled sideways across Lini's living room, the three of us are all lungs full of warmth from n-hexane, and about my case manager, when I don't pick up on her second call, my cell phone seems to melt inside my palm. It's a strange sensation, and with another hour passing over us, we watch as Carmichael pulls down his baseball cap over his head. He leans over slowly and plays the song 'By This River' by Brian Eno on his computer. Then the next hour arrives and Lini hands both of us three Ibuprofens each. She's also spilt these from her 800 milligram case.

We take them with glasses of milk and clumps of brown sugar, and I feel the warmth expanding, growing out from my chest and kneading into my fingertips. The sunlight casts a wide flat beam over the coffee table, and after we've finished, we place the crystals holding our milk between its narrow legs. Then I close my eyes again and hear my case manager calling out for me. Her voice comes across as the murmur of my cell phone vibrating. It feels like a hand foraging over my thigh and this time, I pick it up and answer her. First, my heart leaps as I think of Bhut' Vuyo stretching his wife beater under his overalls, hunched over a Telkom pay phone, but then I check the number again and the code is 011. I put the receiver back against my face and hear the sound of a hundred telephones ringing together in unison, and then the sound of my case manager climbing from underneath this din, shouting at me through a deep ocean of static, the holes left by all the copper stolen from the lines in the sky. Then there's this big wind behind her voice and she tells me if I miss another meeting my insurers will have no choice but to cut me off. She tells me how they haven't even seen a sheet with my CD4 count for close to five months, now, and that I should know better than being this reckless with their program.

So I nod.

In response, I play my part for her by readjusting the phone on my face. Something that's not difficult to figure out about my case manager and me is that we've never gotten along. Not really, in any case. I only know her as Sis' Thobeka, never having bothered to ask her for a full name. I guess to me, Sis' Thobeka's just one of many medical bureaucrats I have to pass through during my decay. She's a middle-aged woman who calls me from some air-conditioned office in the north of Johannesburg. There isn't much else to say about us. She once told me that she fell into her line of work because she felt a

compulsion towards assisting the frail, that she had a hundred coat hangers from stopping at road intersections for drunks, and the first time she took up my case, I remember it was about four years ago, we spoke on the line and she told me how she'd grown tired of nursing all the dejected from east Soweto, the one's she found in I.C.U, broken into soft wet pieces in Baragwanath. To her credit, this introduction had been unexpected and as a result had left a reluctant mark on me. On occasion, when the two of us speak, I still think of Sis' Thobeka as existing between then and now. I still think about the number of people she's had to witness turning into a powder under her watch. I guess this makes it easier for me, somehow. Even though she didn't ask, I told Sis' Thobeka how I got sick by accident. She hadn't said anything in return on the phone as the minutes grew loose between us, and to this day, I doubt she thinks it provident to believe anything that forms more than a single word from my mouth.

Which I don't really mind.

It suits the both of us.

So on the line, now, I tell her, okay.

She says, okay, what?

I tell her I've got a meeting scheduled, today.

That's good, she tells me. Now listen, Lindanathi. Take yourself to that meeting, and then email us a proof of your attendance with your CD4 count. We've approved you for the latest shipment of the medications, but now you have to do your part for us, also. From my side, I start nodding.

Then I tell her, okay.

You have a good care package, here, she says. Don't let it go to waste with foolishness.

Then there's a pause between us and she asks me if I'm doing fine, in any case. From my side, I'm about to answer her when



she says for me to hold on for a second. This is Sis' Thobeka, my case manager, and I'm about to answer her when she says to me she has another call coming in. Then she says for me to wait, and it's a long time before I get the idea of pulling my cell phone away from my face that her voice turns into a dial tone. I unclench my eyelids and find both Carmichael and Lini staring at me. Their brows are creased as they move closer towards me, their outlines melting softly into the walls behind them. They tell me, Nathi, are you okay? My mouth still feels blow dried. I look up and ask them the same.

**The way I got to know them**, by the way, my two closest friends, here, Linireaux and Carmichael, is that we met up for the first time at one of the many HIV and drug counselling sessions scattered in clinics across this city. Where we were when this happened was the basement parking lot of a free clinic in Wynberg, and the way it took place is that the seminar room upstairs had been locked up and taped shut, there'd been a mercury spill, and the group couldn't meet in there on account of the vapours released being toxic to human tissue. Once time began to pass, I got used to not going up, there.

I guess we all did.

In the beginning, I attended these meetings alone.

From Obs to Wynberg, I'd catch a taxi and make my way over to an afternoon's worth of counselling, and by the end of my first month, there, when the seminar room had been scanned and checked out clean for decontamination, everyone decided how they preferred it down below.

Maybe we all want to be buried, here, I joked with them.

It was the first time I'd spoken in group.

It used to take me a while, back then.

The remark succeeded in making a few of them laugh, winning a few chuckles even from the old timers, and later, I wrote down my first addiction story to share with the group the following week. It was from a film I saw adapted from a book I wasn't likely to read. Then Lini and Carmichael arrived on the Wednesday just after that. I noticed them immediately. Something seemed to draw us in together from our first meeting.

During the coffee break we stood by the serving table in front of a peeling Toyota bakkie and mumbled tentatively towards each other's profiles. I learnt that Lini was a teacher. She pulled her shifts at a day-care centre in Mowbray, and she was there on account of the school taking in its first openly positive pupil. Carmichael, who leaned against the table, gulped more than sipped at the coffee from his styro, and he said that he suffocated through his life working on the top floor of his uncle's computer firm. He told us he was there to shop for a social issue they could use for their corporate responsibility strategy. He called it CRS, I remember.

They impressed me, I guess, and before we sat down, I told them how I used to be a lab assistant at Cape Peninsula Tech. I told them that in a way, this was part of how I got to be sick with what I have. Then we sat back down on our plastic chairs, and fidgeting for comfort, we listened to members of the group as they assessed each other's nightmares. They passed them along with a familiar casualness, and when the discussion turned to drug abuse, as it always did during the last half hour of a session, none of us three had anything to add. I looked over at Carmichael and caught him

hiding a grin behind his fist. Lini was blinking at the ceiling. I felt I didn't need any more evidence of our kinship.

Those days, like now, our meetings only lasted two hours long. So when that one came to an end, I collected my proof of attendance and exchanged my numbers with Carmichael and Lini. We said our goodbyes at the entrance of the parking lot and later, within that same week, I think, we were huffing paint thinner together in my flat in Obs.

**Coming down from Industrial** isn't as easy as pulling in your first huff. Once I put down the phone from Sis' Thobeka's telephone call, the three of us take turns splashing our faces with cold water from the kitchen tap. Then we stand around and lean against Lini's kitchen counter, knocking into each other's foreheads, and eating ginger-flavoured ice blocks from a cracked blue tray. Then, when we're done with that, Lini bolts the latches on her door and we take the elevator down to ground. The atmosphere feels warm and slippery around my skin. Glide, my mind tells me, and so I try to do that.

In the courtyard downstairs, Ethelia, the little girl who builds and restores peace to concrete empires we'll never know, has disappeared. Her cities now lie in ruin, scattered in a loose ring around the broken water fountain, and I look for her in the places she disappears to. When we reach the end of the courtyard, however, there's still no sign of her or her shadows. We pass reception woozily and walk out of Lini's building.

This is when I take out my cell phone.

I've decided to deposit money into Bhut' Vuyo's account.

I ask him for his account number, but the message won't send. It displays a red X, showing that I'm out of airtime.

Then Lini buzzes the gate open in the parking lot and we wend a curving path through Newlands' leafy streets. We head down towards the main road, where we balance each other as we wait for a taxi. We spend a few minutes like that, smoking cigarettes under a bus cover with a bright Burger King ad, telling middling, half-finished jokes, before we catch a taxi that says it's headed up to Wynberg from town. Then, moving inside the vehicle, I look through the window and the sky has suddenly grown overcast. It shimmers like a swirling liquid, a silver coin, a spill of mercury. I look down at my hands and don't find any blood beneath my fingernails. Maybe Bhut' Vuyo will take offence to my money.

**We score a lot of our customers** from attending these group meetings for the HI-Virus here in Cape Town. We've been to meetings as far out as Hout Bay, before, Khayelitsha, Langa, Bellville, we've taken two or three of them in Paarl, and once, when we hitched the 12 'o clock train from the railway station in Rondebosch, we had one in Simon's Town. I guess it's a part of it to get around the way we do. We hand out pamphlets and pass anyone who wants to buy from us an email they can use for orders.

The taxi to Wynberg drops us off on the main road.

I look for a place to buy airtime, but have no change to charm the hawkers with. The women sit on cracked SAB crates, squinting at me through the leather of dark, folded faces. Their eyes are glassy with glaucoma. They watch me like marbles spinning inside wet

earth. Maybe they've heard from Bhut' Vuyo. In front of their judgment, I pull out lint from my pockets. Then Lini pulls me away, and for the next moment, the three of us stand just a block off the clinic. We knit our way through the stream of daytime traffic, and in the sky above, the day's gone full grey, but still holds on to its heat. We share a cigarette as we weave through the shoppers, hawkers and gaartjies. Then we take a right turn into a one-way that leads us up into the clinic's street. It's a white building with a green fence and a face brick finish. Carmichael, Lini and I walk around the boom gate and make our way into the building's basement, where they've added extra light fixtures to the ceiling. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the new coating of paint. I let go of my cell phone and rub them with my fingertips. The place looks a lot brighter. They've managed to do a lot of work on the walls. We also learn that they've offered free parking to drivers who allow the group to hang up posters on their cars, and according to Mary, our counsel leader's thinking, these posters keep our concentration from deflecting the help of the group. They keep us from burrowing into the tiny tortures each of us gather here to flush out, she says, and myself, I don't know if I agree, but today I'm willing to try. Most of them pat us on the back, anyway, that's what you see.

Look and they tell us, Silence Equals Death.

Look and they tell us, Choose Your Side.

The three of us sit down and wait for the session to begin.

Mary, our red-haired counsel leader, sits on a plastic chair opposite the three of us, a halo from the fluorescents sketching a delicate crown around her Technicolor bob. I blink for a long moment before Lini touches my knee and shakes me back to life.

Luthando and I once visited cousins we had in King William's Town when we were ten. We stole out to the Candies and Novelties

store behind the Post Office, one Saturday morning, next to Archie's Pizzeria and opposite the monument park. We were looking for firecrackers, thick Black Widows we could stuff into gaping Cherry Coke cans, and as a bonus, we spent some time in front of the counter display, too, smudging it up with our prints, where we ogled the new All-in-One TV Game cartridges behind the glass. We went up and down the aisles after that, taking our time, and drinking in a fortune of what we couldn't afford. It wasn't long before a woman who looked like Mary called out to us and asked us what we wanted from the store. We told her we were browsing and she told us we could do that from outside. So we left. Luthando wanted to go back inside and spit on the woman's greasy forehead, but I stopped him. We were visitors in this town, I said. So we lifted the scratched up tongues of the pay phones on Smith Street, instead, the sun beating down our square shaved heads, and then we walked passed King Theatre and up to Ferrer's Sports, where the security guard, a dark burly man called Chaz, allowed us to muck around with a huge tennis ball that smelled of bleach.

When I open my eyes, again, here's Neil.

My mouth feels scorched and my hands damp with sweat.

I grip my phone.

My eyes are open wide.

Neil's a former maths teacher hailing from an estate somewhere in Constantia. He's twice divorced, has rails on his arms and keeps a rigorous tik habit. He taught private school for a few years and talks like he walked in here by mistake. No one ever wants to partner up with him for assignments. Neil, he's the sort of guy you don't see getting well at places like this. Today he's wearing a short sleeved flannel shirt tucked into chinos. He's a thin guy, has a gnawed coat hanger for a frame, with dark, wavy hair falling down to

his neck, and a pair of broad framed glasses that flash under the basement's fluorescent lighting.

The rest of us serve as his audience, if you'll call it that.

Myself, I don't know if I should get airtime.

Maybe I've waited too long.

I could just ignore it.

I close my eyes again and open them.

I breathe.

Like most addicts, Neil has the same circumstances to blame for every waking hour of his life. Today, like always, he tells us that he wants a mass deportation of all the illegal immigrants who've gathered and festered inside his country. Neil tells us we should start off with the Nigerians, first, and then follow up with the Somalis. He says he bought a straw just last week, on a Tuesday, and that it was an unexpected and foolish relapse. He cut himself with the lolly after he'd smoked it and eventually passed out on his kitchen floor. He shows us his bandaged hand and tells us he's begun to sell his appliances, again, but only a toaster, this time, and an old DVD player he never uses since he's moved up to Blu-Ray. He says he feels too ashamed to walk to the bank, and in the end, Mary thanks him for sharing and the rest of us nod as we're supposed to. I remember Lini asking why Neil didn't get the virus, already. Carmichael and I laughed because it was true.

We could've made a lot of money off him.

Inside the parking lot, Neil's brought our drug talk forward an entire hour and a half, and when Olive gets up to speak, it seems the trend will persist for the duration of our two hour session.

I guess this is just as well.

I need to keep myself occupied, in any case.

I need to keep away from Bhut' Vuyo's reach.

I stretch out on my chair.

Olive has a respiratory obstruction that clogs the walls of her larynx. It's the result of nursing a ten year old habit on the pipe, and I can hear her pulling the air inside her lungs from across the room, a wheeze that reaches me from where I sit about six chairs away. It's a song of the damage she carries around inside her, and like most places in the world, our basement here is an education in survival. Perhaps it's best for me to forget my troubles and grow a greater sympathy for others. It could be what Bhut' Vuyo wants from me in Du Noon. I concentrate on her voice.

In our time together, we've learnt what we can of Olive's troubles here in the Cape. She was born with the last name of de Villiers, to pious parents established in a Presbyterian church in Maitland. Her teenage years were split between Hanover and Grassy Park, and she's now a single mother, headed towards the end of her thirties, and has the kind of hard, but pleasant face you see often in women from the Cape Flats, the flatland area that stretches out to the east of the Southern Suburbs, where she works as a soup-kitchen cook at a backyard orphanage in Lavender Hill. When she stands up to talk, Olive tells us about the only story she's ever claimed to care for in our meetings here in Wynberg. It's about her struggle to form a relationship with Emile, her only son and child.

I guess we give her the same silence we afforded to Neil.

With Olive, I've often been capable of removing myself from my own thoughts for a few moments.

I watch her now as she speaks.

She's wearing a black, ribbed polo neck sweater and a sea-coloured doek that holds her dreadlocks in a neat parting, her hair pushed back in two thick columns that fall away in rolling curves behind her ears. She's had her dreadlocks tinted into a warm amber



colour that, depending on the kind of day one has here at the clinic, reminds me of either sunset or oxidation.

Today, I fill up with the image of rusting pipes.

Still, I manage to let go of my cell phone.

I knead my knuckles together and get a moment of respite from my thoughts. I manage to keep them circled on Olive.

What else is there to say about our ruin?

The worst day in Olive's life occurred when she forgot her son's name. It was after her first relapse and when she asked him, later and with an air of caution and cheer, Emile had picked up on the odour of her transgression. Olive told us that she didn't recall the first three years in which she met the boy's father, in which her son Emile was conceived, and in which she gave birth to him at a active birth unit in Liebeeck. It had disappeared. Her son grew up with her parents, she tells us, and of late, she's begun to suspect that her apologies have started to layer him with a hardened skin, to make him believe she's a woman who deserves no better than penance.

We listen.

Olive's the one I've come to feel for the most in our meetings.

Over time, though, I've had to accept that I cannot do anything to help her. What she suffers from is something I have no treatment for, and I watch her now as she looks around the room and smiles at us with embarrassment. Often, I have to avert my eyes whenever Olive does this, but today my gaze remains passive and arrested on her frame. My feelings have been drained from me.

I realize I can no longer use her as a hiding place.

So I close my eyes, again.

One week after I deregistered from university and my mother barred me from her home, I began to visit prostitutes in Mowbray. I never slept with them. Instead, one day, I was returning from the bars

on Long Street when I bungled the directions to my flat and asked the cab driver to pull over at a garage for a pie and a packet of chips. On my way back to the car, I saw them shivering on the main road and when our eyes met, they began to beckon to me all at once. I'd felt amused, I guess, and wanted, and so I'd walked over to them. I watched as they took turns soliciting me for sex, and in the end I gave them the chips and went back to the cab. I would pass by there often before I met Carmichael and Linireaux. I talked to them and gave them what I bought from the service station. It felt like a comfort, and redirected me from growing morose as the night drew to an end. Maybe I've been looking for the same thing here in Olive. She's another hardened woman who uses straws on herself.

He's only a child, ek weet, she tells us. You see, my boy, Emile, he's starting to make out that everything I do is a gemors. I can sommer hear it in the way he speaks to me when I'm visiting and my parents have their people around.

Her face begins to contort at this point.

It takes on a sneer as the tears begin to leak down her cheeks.

She tells us that being pitied by her son has her thinking about smoking, again. Her heart is a paper in pieces when Emile makes her hunger for the rocks. In the end, there's a silence as Mary thanks her for her words. Then Olive sits down and a moment passes before the drug trend is broken up.

I find myself relieved, despite my thoughts, earlier.

Maybe a stronger activity is what I need.

The HIV section of our talks is when Carmichael, Lini and I begin our work, here. It's clear I cannot lose myself in the others.

Maybe work is what I need.

I look down.

We usually assign one of us to take down notes.

We catalogue the stage of the disease in a member, marking points for an infected spouse, and we work out a treatment plan we can sell to them. Today, I signal to both of my friends that I volunteer.

Carmichael and Lini nod and lean back.

Then Ta Dennis is the next guy from our group to share.

Here's a little more you could know about him, too.

He's a timer and his last name is Dlamini.

He claims to have the cleanest story from the people, here.

Not that it ever matters to anyone.

Hear him tell it and Ta Dennis says he received his infection in the late 90's while working as a paramedic for Christian Barnhard Memorial in town, and to this day, the hospital covers his health costs and sends him a Christmas greeting at the end of each year. They also gave him the car he worked with, a commercial Ford minibus, and from where he's seated, which is only two chairs away from me, he gets up and starts telling us how there's a man who's curing his wife in Khayelitsha. I turn around and catch Carmichael looking up from his cell phone. Ta Dennis scans the room with a mechanic grin on his face, his eyes darting back and forth, skipping across the members gathered in our circle. In the end, he settles them down on what looks like a new pair of desert boots.

The others will think he's turned into a malkop, this guy, but he insists. It's true, he tells us.

So we listen to him.

From the side of the circle, Mary furrows her brow.

In her role as our counsel leader, Mary's duties include making sure all our meetings remain civil and well-informed. Sometimes she intervenes when there's a piece of misinformation too large to ignore around the centre of a member's story. In this way, you could say that Mary, our counsel leader here in the

Wynberg group, she takes the role of rearranging our personal histories for us. She edits them where she finds us mistaken, adding her own revisions to the stories we use to explain ourselves to the world outside. Today, however, she chooses to remain quiet. Like the rest of us, she waits for Ta Dennis to continue telling his story. For his part, he rubs a palm over his mouth and goes on.

I begin to take down notes.

Ta Dennis says, this man, I swear to you, my friends.

He says, he came to Site C not two months ago and he's a medical doctor. He says, he's a white man, just like you, and points a finger at Neil. He widens his grin, but the former maths teacher just responds by waving his bony hand at him.

Oh, just get on with it, he says.

In response, Ta Dennis grins and scratches his beard.

He carries on like Neil instructs him to.

I guess this is Ta Dennis.

What else can I tell you about him?

I thought I saw my dad the first time I saw this guy.

To look at him, imagine a squat guy in his mid-fifties, a man with a receding hairline and a salt and pepper beard, otherwise in good shape for his age and for this place we're in, here. He's sturdy from what the hospital pays for him to take down his throat each morning, and he drives a Ford Transit with a cracked ceiling that hauls kids to school and back in Khayelitsha. His wife, whose positive status they've decided to keep under concealment, a secret both to her family and her colleagues, works at a Pick 'n Pay stall in St. Georges Mall in town, where she rings and bags groceries like I've once had to do in my own life, before. Ta Dennis tells us the man opened a hostel in Site C.

He tells us this is a proper place and that he's very serious.

He says, this doctor, he told my wife to stop working one week ago and that's where we've sent her. Remember, I told you last month that Lindiwe had another fainting spell at work? Well, it happened again, he says. Then he rubs a palm over his mouth and chin. Lini inches her chair forward and so do the two of us, me and Carmichael, we draw closer to him. The thing about these fainting spells is that they've come up once before, and the three of us exchanging glances like we're doing now, it's me having fallen on my face from more than one of them in my life. I rest my notes on my knees. Then to my side, Ta Dennis goes on with his story.

He says he knows it's a difficult thing to believe in.

He says, even in my township, the people don't believe.

I begin to feel disturbed by his false hopes.

My thoughts circle back to Bhut' Vuyo.

Each of us looks for the first way out.

I consider myself.

To tell you more about my fainting spells, I remember once taking a job at a Kwik Spar in Rondebosch East. It was only three times a week, and I rang up groceries to supplement my rent deposit and a growing craving I had for Industrial at the time. I was new to the sensation. Then, this one time at work, a lady had forgotten that I'd given her her change, and angry, she'd thrown her groceries at me. There was a tub of yogurt in her bag that burst, turning the front of my shirt bright pink and sticky, and in my head, I took her baby's leg and stuffed it down her throat. I remember this because I didn't faint, right then, even though I felt woozy, but only later, during my lunch hour, when I stood outside in the parking lot. I was waiting for the sun to dry my shirt when I suddenly remembered how I'd wished her a good day.

Now here, inside the clinic, Ta Dennis keeps talking to our circle. He tells us that the man told him to stop giving Lindiwe his medication. Ta Dennis says, all of it.

He swipes the air with his right hand and looks up at us, gauging his audience for shock.

Then he goes on. The doctor said we shouldn't give her any pills from me, he says.

I look over at Mary and she glowers openly, now.

This is something to be expected from her, I guess.

Mary doesn't believe Ta Dennis should be sharing his prescriptions with his wife. It's the way most professionals think about us, but the way his story goes is that the hospital's penance didn't extend to cover his wife Lindiwe's illness. While he speaks, I close my eyes and listen to the blood pounding inside my head.

The blood with the disease.

Then I lean back, again.

Dennis, please.

This is Mary, finally, with an intervention.

She asks Ta Dennis to stop.

She says to him, Dennis, listen now, what we're here for is to lighten each other's burdens, we're not here to spread false hopes from crackpots. I hope you take Lindiwe out of that hostel, too, Dennis, she warns him. You're putting your wife at a very big risk with this nonsense.

Mary gets up from her chair.

I mean, if money's the problem, here, she says to him, then why don't you just come upstairs with me after the talk? We can easily look for a treatment plan for Lindiwe. She should be present, of course, but time and time again you've refused to bring her to

meetings, haven't you? You think it's a good idea that she hides her status from even professionals, she says. Don't you?

I start to feel embarrassed for Ta Dennis.

I feel Mary's words searing into me as Ta Dennis grins.

Maybe this is what I deserve, I think to myself, to be scolded.

Ta Dennis keeps nodding as Mary speaks.

He stares down at the floor, turning himself to easy prey.

This is when irritation starts to burn under Mary's voice.

Dennis, she says, with pointed emphasis. You need to stop spreading this nonsense and putting your family in danger. There's no cure for HIV, but as you can see with your own self, it's a condition anyone can live positively with. She turns around to confirm this with the rest of us in the circle. We nod and so does Ta Dennis.

Yes, he says, quietly.

Well alright, then, Mary says. You can sit back down, now.

Then she turns around and searches for whoever wants to go on next. Please remember, the rest of you, she says to us, what we're here for is to help each other heal.

Then Mary sits back down and flips through a binder with our names written on it. Let's have one more speaker, shall we? Then we can break up for biscuits and coffee.

We nod.

In defeat, Ta Dennis sits back down and as he does so, and for the first time, today, the fluorescents flicker twice above us. I look up and wonder about all the people hefting their own lives from one room to the other on the floors above us. I remember how I once saw a woman there, who had what I have, only it was compounded with acute tuberculosis. Her salivary glands had blown out as wide as a Bubble Eye goldfish, and she was there to dispute the illness's window period, which had rendered her results indeterminate to the

doctors. When the nurses began to ignore her, she turned around and laughed at them with this exuberant bitterness, and then, swivelling on her heels, she hurled her objections at the rest of us patients in the waiting room. I think of her now as we sit in our circle. Where we are is the clinic's basement parking lot, and I watch as Lini places her hand on my knee, again. When she does this, the table holding our coffee begins to tremble and before long, a car groans to life on either side of our assembly's silence. It's time for us to return to the world, it seems to say, and upon hearing this, my phone finds its way back into my palm.

**My uncle is a man set on changing my life.** Maybe I should accept this and no longer go on fighting him. When we're done with the session, Carmichael, Lini and I decide to go for a pizza at Babbo on main road in Claremont. They have this special there we can afford, and so we order two bottles of wine that we polish over a large Margherita. During intervals, I look across the road to where I could buy airtime. Carmichael tells us he knows a guy in the same building he can pat down for about three grams of cheese. So we take the elevator up to him, this said guy who's holding the bankie, and he tells us his name is Arnold, a trustafarian type who comes out in silk boxers and tousled hair, a boom of down tempo beats pounding out of the subwoofer he's got set up on the living room floor. Carmichael hands him three five tigers for the weed and calls him an overpriced, but reliable asshole. They share a forced, stilted laugh on his threshold, and then we take the elevator back down to ground. We walk passed Babbo, waving guiltily at the old waitress clearing our



table. Then we wait for a taxi at the corner opposite Cavendish Mall, across the road from the Nando's. I decide against walking inside the mall to buy an airtime voucher.

What, Carmichael says to us, finally.

We've been directing stares at him ever since we left Arnold's place.

I know him from a guy at work, he says to us.

Lini and I don't say anything in response.

We nod and that's all.

Then Lini says, what do you think of guys like that, anyway? He probably has German parents that own like half of Cape Town.

I laugh.

He makes it look easy, I say to her.

Then our taxi arrives and a gaartjie leaps out hefting stacks of coins in a canvas sack, a white Sanlam money bag that's gone brown around the bottom stitching. He points us towards the taxi and we pile in before the door slides shut on its own.

**Inside the Hi-Ace**, I take Carmichael's cell phone and SMS Yes in response to my uncle Vuyo's message. I write Lindanathi to sign it and then attach my number for him to reply to. I resist an urge to turn off my cell phone when I do this. If this is what he wants then this is what he wants.

**My friends and I spend the next hour** putting up posters along the main road, from Claremont to Salt River, all of them telling people how to buy my ARV's from me. Then we carry glue in Tupperware containers from Lini's fridge and jump a train to the city before we take a bus out to the West Coast. I take a look at the time on my phone and it's only just after mid-afternoon. I guess this is why they call Cape Town the city of slumber. Time seems to speed up and then stall, here, and then it speeds up again and stalls.

**We pass Paarden Eiland** just as the sun begins to burn itself through the clouds. It throws down a harsh beam that bisects the bus into two and Lini taps my shoulder and says to me to look at how it's all happening to us. Lini's sitting on the seat behind me. She taps me on the shoulder and says to me to look at how the three of us are all on the right side of the light. I look and we are. Though it's the last thing I feel.

**We pass by Milnerton**, next, the ocean sparkling and still, covered in white spots flecked across its vast surface, as if all the salt had been sucked up to the lid of the Atlantic. Then Blouberg, the destination we've chosen for today's excursion, lists into the view of our bus driver's windscreen. Slouched on my seat, I open the notebook program on my cell phone. I've got orders for Ronny, Lenard and Leonardo. I've got one for Millicent. I write Dennis and

add a question mark after his name. Then, after a moment, I also add Lindiwe, his wife. I write that they have 0 children. I also note that as both reactives, they can no longer procreate. Like me, this is the end of their line.

**In Blouberg, we stalk into an internet café**, some gamer powered cavern complete with a coffee plunger and blue carpet tiles, the computers sectioned into black cubicles with little hooks that hold up oversized head phones. It's one of those LAN gamer killing pens, I say to Lini, the first-person shooter covens that were so popular in the first decade of our century. There's a sign that says they sell 29 rand airtime vouchers, here. When Lini nods, somewhat distractedly, I fax my attendance slip to Sis' Thobeka at the front counter and catch Carmichael looking around with this grim, beaten expression on his face. He doesn't like what year we've stepped into, I guess, and behind him, Lini takes note of this and raises her eyebrows at me. I shrug. I guess I'm not surprised by that.

I don't like it, either.

I was such a frightened little shit when I was in high school, Carmichael says to us. The voice he uses sounds as if it's only meant for his ears, not all six of ours, and after that he looks up at me with a weak smile. Maybe he wants to reconcile this gap he's suddenly stretched out between us, and so I wait for him to speak, but he chooses to leave the ending out of this anecdote. Not every story begs to be told, I suppose. Lini bops her head on his shoulder as if in agreement with me. So I buy the airtime, pay the computer guy, and we walk out.

This is beach weather, almost, Lini remarks.

She stretches her arms out in front of her to feel the rays for evidence, but the centre of our solar system responds by providing a contradiction for her. Lini drops her arms back at her sides, again.

Like, half of almost, she says, correcting herself.

So Carmichael and I nod.

It's a fitting description.

Lini always has a way of sounding concise in the face of things that offer her disapproval, and as if to defy the weather's indifference to her will, today, the three of us trudge into a Milky Lane in the corner up ahead, next to a Total filling station that rounds off Blaauwberg Road. We buy a vanilla milkshake and a pair of peanut butter and banana waffles before crossing the road into Blouberg beach, where we step over a small wooden railing and walk down a short pier to a grassy knot on the sand, a spot not too far away from the mildly polluted shoreline. Once there, we settle ourselves down in front of a large crane ship that slowly drifts passed the vista of Table Mountain, a proclaimed new wonder of the world, while above us, the sky clears up in a rounded blue column, spilling down enough light to make the ocean water appear blinding.

Carmichael opens up our boxed packages.

He uses a plastic knife to cut up the waffles while Lini rolls a joint from the section Arnold sold us. When she's done, she licks it from the tip to the gerrick and lights it with a copper Zippo from her shirt pocket. She takes a drag which she holds in, taking sips of the air in tiny increments, before she passes it on to me and exhales.

I lean back.

The air feels cool, but pleasant on my skin, and when I look out at the water, it seems to flow out in undulations that extend to the

far reaches of our world. I think of how easy it would be to just blend into nature. I close my eyes and take a drag.

I try to savour the ganja's effect.

You know, Carmichael, says, his voice reaching me from somewhere behind the orange blood in my eyelids, Napoleon once had a battle, here. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or something. I think more than 500 hundred people died.

He takes a bite from his waffle and leans back on his thin elbows. I pass him the joint and he asks Lini and me if we can't imagine this. Carmichael says, look, where we're sitting now could be the exact same place some British or French asshole drove a bayonet into another lackey. Or one guy could've been standing with his boot on the other's face, pushing the barrel of his rifle down his throat. Hey! We found the natives, first! Non! Nique ta mere!

Carmichael does the French well and the three of us laugh. He's mentioned travelling as a stool pigeon for his uncle before.

That's probably this entire country, I tell him.

I know.

I should feel stupid for telling them something so banal, but they're my friends and I guess the three of us are succeeding in getting high. They let me get away with it.

Carmichael nods and takes another drag.

Hey, Lini says. I didn't know that about Blouberg. Maybe I should talk about it to the kids, next week. What do you guys think?

Sure, Carmichael says. You can turn into a musket adventure. He brushes his palms over his jeans. He says, isn't that every classic in the world, anyway? Guys eating hardtack until their teeth fall off from scurvy? There's a white man. He boards a ship and finds something someone already owns.

He peels off a slice from the waffle and bites into it, sloppily, grunting at us through the batter like some asshole Disney pirate.

Then he starts flapping his lips at Lini and she pushes him back, before he dribbles on her. Laughing, Lini rubs her hands down her thighs and clutches her kneecaps.

I feel lighter, watching them.

It's up to Bhut' Vuyo to say what he wants from me.

I realize that nothing solid has been said, yet.

Thin as it is, this comes as a relief.

Last week, Lini says to us, I made my little ones draw me a picture of space, right? I said guys, I want you to imagine you aren't on this planet, anymore. I told them to imagine they're on another one and they're looking at Earth from a distance, away from their yards, away from their parents, and away even me from me, she says. There, I think to myself.

Carmichael and I exchange looks.

This is how this usually goes with us.

Next, Lini pauses her story about her day care class and starts to talk to us about Cape Canaveral. If you know anything at all about Linireaux, then you'll know this isn't her first time. Right now, she starts by describing the headland on the Space Coast before describing the cape in Florida, where the North Americans launch more than half of their space missions to colonize space. Then she moves on to the Kennedy Space Center, where she tells us what she thinks about the collective unconscious, and about the embedded memory all of us humans share of the planet. She tells us how she feels like she's been there, before, at one point or another in her life, maybe crossing over an empty parking lot inside Jetty Park, or lying under a clear blue sky and drinking a molten smoothie, or kicking around a bottle cap, or standing within touch of the station where

they've built up the launch sites. She tells us how the details don't matter and according to everything she knows about the Space Coast, and sometimes even Merritt Island, she assures us that none of this should come as a surprise. The way Lini thinks about her kinship with the headland, she tells us, isn't because she visited a family friend on the Florida coast when she was just over twelve years old, it's because everyone on our planet has a story to tell about space. This is what she tells us she believes.

Lini says everyone has an idea about what the sky turns into over our heads at night.

Hearing her, I feel like I always do, which is uncertain.

I don't know.

I have a feeling it might be true.

Carmichael, on the other hand, says he doesn't have one.

I watch him, now, as he pulls on what's left of the roach before he buries the ember of the cigarette under the sand. Lini tears off a corner from a nearby waffle, pushes it into her mouth, and chews on it for a few moments, sucking the syrup clean off the batter before licking her long fingers dry. None of us eat the banana slices right away. They pile up in the red boxes for later use as I roll up another joint from the ounce Arnold sold us. When I look up to lick it before the twist, the usual method I apply before I spin the wheel on a Zippo, I spot a container ship making its way into our view of the horizon. Maybe it comes all the way from Singapore, I think, or Japan, or even Norway, or some other place we might never get to see for ourselves. I roll a gerrick for the joint and turning around, Lini asks Carmichael to tell us a story about space.

I don't have one, he says to her.

Then she leans over and hands me her lighter. When she draws herself back in, again, she says to Carmichael, of course you do. She says to him, everyone has at least one space story in them.

I flip the copper lid and torch the joint on the pointed end of its skin. It burns slow and I take a long drag before I let it out in thick white plumes from my nostrils. Carmichael says his space story is more of a masturbation story, if we're being honest, and as soon as he says this, Lini claps her hands and tells him now he simply has no choice, but to tell.

Carmichael laughs and Lini tells him to go on.

She waves her hand and I start laughing, too.

Then Carmichael says okay to the both of us.

He says for us to get quiet and he'll let us know.

So we do that.

Right, then, Carmichael starts, so I know this guy called Siko.

He tells us, this happens in the last decade.

So, anyway, this dude, he's my best friend, right, and he calls himself the Fourth Prophet, Carmichael says. We should be at school, but instead we're at his house watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I've always told Siko how it gives me nightmares, that flick, and he always smiles and says to me he gets the same from life. Something about Siko is that apart from telling you he's the Fourth Prophet, whatever that means, he'll also tell you he's this interloper in reality. So we're sitting there in his lounge, right, watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and we start reciting dialogue. The day's eating into school hours and me and Siko, we're making speech bubbles for Spielberg's aliens. So Siko goes, all you have to do is pretend and you'll be okay, probably. He says in life, only the best actors make it out. It comes out of nowhere and eventually, Spielberg's world dies under a thick blackness and I get



up to change the video. You said you wanted to fall in love, Siko tells me. I freeze. Well, check this out, he says. I've got just the girl for you. So I'm still up fiddling with the TV when I look over my shoulder and see him throwing a copied disc onto the coffee table. He says, right there, man, his braces as bright as ice in the daylight.

So this is porn, Lini says, interrupting Carmichael.

This is what the both of us are thinking, in fact.

Carmichael tells us no, it isn't.

Instead, he says, it's A.I.

Look, Carmichael says. It's this purple disc without a label on it, right? So I open my CD-ROM drive and drop it on the tray, and when I slot that in, it asks me if I want to install and I tap the Enter button twice. Then I get up from my chair and slide my schoolbag off my back. My shoulders hurt and my homework, which lies untouched after an entire day off, seems almost physically foul now in the pit of my backpack, now, emanating a deep dissatisfaction I feel about myself. You know how that is, right?

We do.

Lini and I nod.

While Carmichael talks, I take a toké from the joint and hyperventilate. Then I pass it on to Linireaux.

So it's this program some guy's built, Carmichael goes on.

I blow out smoke through my nostrils, again.

The main thing you do with it, he says, is that you have a conversation. So either you ask it all these questions or you answer them. The guy's built it on a simple enough coding language, the graphic user interface isn't much to look at, it's more than a bit shitty, to be honest, it's just some text box with an 8-bit bimbo with red hair, green eyes, and a ridiculous pair of tits. There's an indication in the grammar that he might have tried to make her Afrikaans, but failed. It

defaults to about three or four stock answers when you confuse the simple input loop he has. This is even before I crack the thing open and have a look at what he's done for source. One of these replies is this ponderous ellipsis, and the rest of them are like these sassy remarks, potshots meant to egg on whatever asshole's typing on it. Context doesn't seem altogether important, either, but the overall accuracy of the simulation is uncanny, even I have to admit, and in this way, the thing is genuinely satisfying. Depending on how well you perform, the screen rewards the user with a still shot of real tits, providing all the while these sly indications that there might be more in store, a main prize, and this only happens after every few hours or so, teasing out as many slivers of interest available in the user, and I'm sold, I think, after about ten minutes or so of typing, when I say something to compliment it and it tells me to go fuck myself. Carmichael leans back, at this point, and I guess this is how his story ends. I was alone in my room, he tells us, and I obliged immediately.

We laugh.

Then closer from the horizon, the Singaporean or Norwegian ship sounds its horn, its bilge cleaving the water like tender skin, guiding the iron vessel to more of us natives inland.

That was almost romantic, Lini says to Carmichael.

Natives from the west of Africa, I think in correction of myself.

I look up and Lini's got a wide grin on her face.

She asks Carmichael if it was his first time.

It was, Carmichael says.

He lies down and knits his hands behind his head.

I didn't get off that much, to tell you the truth, he says, but I stayed up all night typing on that thing.

He sighs and Lini and I remain quiet.

We watch a few ships as they melt into the blurred horizon.

It was better than those killing pens, he says after a while.

His tone has changed.

I lie back and join my friends as the orange blood makes a return to my eyelids. The grass spikes me between my ears and my neck, and the heave of the ocean, when it reaches and surrounds us, sounds like the asthmatic breathing of a gigantic whale. Lini asks Carmichael why he stopped calling himself the Fourth Prophet and Carmichael tells her he stopped because he stopped attending the pens. Then we're quiet for another moment and I suppose it's at this time, with the column of blue finally closing up above us, and the water losing its shimmer and ability to gouge, that my eyelids turn from orange to red and then to black, again, and Bhut' Vuyo, my uncle from Du Noon, he sends me another message telling me to come home.

## Second Part

**I'm in the bathroom** at work and can't get my penis erect. The way this goes is that as soon as I get myself in a good grip I go limp, again. Then Carmichael emails me about our first bulk order. So eventually, I give up on myself. He has Lini cc'd in the header and the email just reads one short paragraph long. It takes up only half the screen on my cell phone and doesn't have a lot to describe. The guy who sent it to us says he'll buy everything off me and pay us double for it when we meet. He says he doesn't want any parcels or messengers sent for his transaction, that we should meet with him in person or there's no deal to be made between the four of us. I read it twice over and look at my phone for another moment. Then I flush the toilet, wash my hands, and walk out back to work. I haven't said anything back to Bhut' Vuyo's last message.

**I have this job**, by the way, that I guess I should've mentioned to you, by now. I work in a hole Greenpoint, and the way I slink into it is that I take myself over there every second Sunday to Wednesday in the afternoons. From the money I collect off the orders Carmichael, Lini and I take in and process, as well as the allowance I receive as compensation for what happened to me those years ago at the Technikon, it's enough to keep me standing well-enough on my feet when my landlord calls for rent at the end of each month. I rent my place from this blond twenty-nine year old MBA student called Francois Viljoen, an ambitious heir and owner of a leg in a chain of famous fish chops, and to pay him, I take a taxi up to Greenpoint

about three out of seven days a week. I arrive at my job and what they have me do there is to stand behind this short vinyl counter, a hollowed out semi-circle I become captain of in my black shirt and orange cap, where I take in rolled up twenties and membership cards from the patrons of the Movie Monocle. So this is me, and for eight hours in a day, this is where you'll find me. I'm at work and when I look up from my hands and see movie posters lined up against the walls, touching each other three meters above solid carpet tiles, while above me, two ceiling fans whop the air, equidistant from my counter and where they've raised the back wall. I always feel like what I am, inside here, a human inside its workplace.

**Close to a minute later**, I walk out of the bathroom drying both of my hands on my jeans. I pat them dry before I settle myself down behind the vinyl counter, where I take out my cell phone and take another look at Carmichael's email that he sent to me. After a while, I press reply to all and start typing above his message. The lettering comes out bold and I decide to leave it, that way. I ask if this guy who emailed us is a cop or what.

Lini sends me back her reply, first.

I hold reservations against thinking it's a cop thing, she says.

There's an ellipsis after her statement, so I wait.

She says, look, we shouldn't panic right away, should we?

Lini says, I mean, this could still be someone's idea of playing a joke on us, right?

I guess this isn't surprising coming from Linireaux.

Not right now, in any case.

Something else I should probably let you know about my friend Linireaux at this point is that on Sundays, she visits an aunt for thirty minutes to an hour in a nursing home in Muizenberg. There, she sits with her in an octagonal courtyard, picking out grass stalks and twigs the two of them knit together into small bows and laurels. Lini uses this time to ease herself into a gentle come down, quelling her anxious feelings about mortality by surrounding herself with human bodies nearing decay. I imagine her there, now, sitting cross-legged and typing at us with the sun full in her face. I guess it's easy to forgive her this reservation. She couldn't be thinking about cops at the place where she is, now.

Then, on my other hand, here's Carmichael, my other friend.

He maintains this email account on behalf of the three of us, and when he types back his reply, he says his response wasn't that different from my own. This doesn't surprise me at all, either. Like me, Carmichael rarely has a moment of Lini's tranquillity, and Sundays for him just mean another computer in another room. He gets come downs no worse and no better than the rest of us, and right, now, he tells me that he knows where I'm coming from with this. He says, I was thinking it might be someone from the SAPS, too, but then this guy sent us a second email.

Then this is when I hear the door open.

I slip my phone back in my pocket and place my hands on the vinyl counter. I look up ahead and keep my back straight.

That's it, keep smiling, my manager, Clifton, tells me.

Until just two months ago, Clifton was just another peon who worked the counter here at the Monocle like the rest of us. He appears out of the door in the far wall, now, holding up a plastic clipboard and slinking out of the store-room like a shaken feline. His

free hand stuffs his shirt into his waist and out of precaution, I keep my eyes on him as he ambles across the room, watching him as he cuts a slow and curving trajectory into the middle of the Family Section. Once there, Clifton cranes his neck sideways and consults his clipboard with the practiced air of a soap opera doctor. Then he stands there, my new boss, his back stiff and his expression stern, and I suppose we're meant to think of him as a formidable force or something, some species of tyrant, standing with purpose in front of *Cloudy, with a Chance of Meatballs*.

So I pull out my phone and place it on the counter, again.

This guy knows who we are, Carmichael says to us.

I scroll down on his message.

Carmichael says before he replied to that first email, he got another one from this same guy. He tells us we should really have a look at this one ourselves. So he sends us the email forward and Lini and I take a moment each to read it. I guess he's right about having to see it with our own eyes. It has a list of our names on it, where we live and where we work, and at the bottom of the email, the message tells us I am not the police, and then it repeats that statement, I am not the police, before it says the man will pay us first and then we can decide for ourselves.

So Lini sends an email back to me, right away.

She asks, so we can just take the money, right?

She says, isn't that what this asshole means?

I'm about to answer her when I hear another sound.

I look up and it's Clifton, my manager, meandering into the Action Section. I guess he's run out of things to do, again, which isn't unusual for him in our past few weeks. I watch him, now, as he trawls the aisles for returned videos that still have missing blocks under them, a more or less forgettable snag from the guys behind the



counter having to chase the clock between the customers and the shelves. Most people who walk in here, they consult us directly about a video's availability, but for Clifton this snag spells out inefficiency, an opportunity for him to set himself apart from the serfs who work the counter. He raises his clipboard and scratches the back of his neck, now, powdering his black collar with a small mist of dandruff flakes. I look back down, again.

I ask my friends, so okay, what's going on?

The two of them don't reply for close to a minute.

I start to feel worry climbing up greasily inside my throat.

From impulse, I open Bhut' Vuyo's second message.

I'm about to type something when Clifton wraps his knuckles on the counter, a gesture that forces me to look up, right away.

Hey, he says.

I look at him and decide to read the grimace on his face as a sign of humour. You have to learn certain manoeuvres with them, I guess. I do what I can to offer him a smile.

You know there's no sleeping on the job, he says, and I nod.

I inch my smile even wider for the guy.

I realize I feel slightly grateful for this distraction.

Clifton turns his head and points at the TV unit we've got mounted on a stand just above the counter. The features on his face pinch inward, disapproval washing across his face like wine on linen.

Jesus, bru, he says, after a moment of eye balling of the TV.

He wipes a thick palm over his chin and asks me what I think we're playing at, here.

Closing the text from my uncle, I turn and look up at the unit.

It's this black-and-white horror movie my colleague Dean Collins has on mute. In it, a woman backs up on a wall cornered by a

hideous monster, and from the wall, an army of arms wraps around her and carries her screaming and kicking into a dark oblivion.

Clifton shakes his head as if to register the shock.

This isn't appropriate stuff for the shop, guys, he says.

The guy looks visibly pained by this.

So I tell him it was on when I came in.

Ja, hey, he says in response.

I guess he's choosing to ignore me.

Which I think is fine by me.

Next, Clifton makes this really big show of shaking his head at the TV, again, and so I look back up and the hideous monster's standing over the screaming woman. She's naked, now, and splayed inside a puddle of black blood. Then the film cuts to the following scene, where the hideous monster gets chased by this hero-type with a gadget gun. Clifton walks around to my side of the counter, squeezing past me, and turns off the player. Then he walks back out, again, and with a deeply dramatic sigh, he raises his arms and asks me where to look for Dean Collins.

For a moment, I just look at him.

I think about how these days, this is what passes for my job.

He's in the bathroom, I tell him.

In case you haven't noticed it, by now, Clifton plays at manager, really well, these days. He's forever sighing from some strain or the other, rolling his eyes in a sitcom character's display of annoyance. I almost expect him to have his fists balled up as he stomps off to hassle Dean Collins in the toilet. Then I look back down at my phone and notice another email from Carmichael.

I scroll down.

He says he's just received a notification SMS from the bank.

He tells us it's a deposit.

Then Carmichael says what the amount is and I stare at my screen for another half minute or so to make sure I'm counting right. I guess Lini feels the same way I do because she doesn't think of anything else to say, either. For a full minute, it's just our silence on that screen. No one says anything.

Then Carmichael sends off another email to us.

In this one, he tells Lini and me that the guy wants to meet up no later than today. Carmichael says the man wants to meet up at Champs on Vic, this tavern that lies just up the road from Mowbray's railway station. I read this with my head still full of the guy's money.

So I guess Lini recovers from her shock before I do, because next I read an email from her asking Carmichael how we're supposed to know who this guy is when we get there. Considering this, Carmichael takes a moment to pass the question on and the three of us wait for the man's response.

Eventually, he types back. Carmichael's response lags, at about twenty seconds over his usual time, and I guess the answer's giving him a reason to pause. Then this is what our friend tells us. Carmichael says we should look for the ugliest man in the bar.

I can't help but wonder if this is my salvation. When Carmichael repeats it, I think maybe Bhut' Vuyo is flushing me out.

**I take a taxi to Lini's flat** after I'm done cashing up at the Monocle. For the first time since I've had to sign on with them, which is about a year ago for me, now, I don't wait for my hours to arrive at their official cut off point, or even for Clifton, my new ex-manager, to come back from scolding Dean Collins in the bathroom. I just feel done and

it becomes enough motivation for me to leave. So I turn around and switch the DVD player back on. Then I drop my orange cap on the counter and walk out, making my way down to the taxi rank on Strand and Adderley. I think of being a human without a workplace. Inside the taxi rank, I buy a pack of Nik Naks, and looking for the bay marked for Claremont, I feel like this is what I've become. I'm a human without a workplace.

**I decide to put my uncle out of my mind.** With the money to think about, it finally seems possible. I manage to keep myself on a delicate balance. Life goes on as we all navigate our need for currency, I reason. This simple understanding seems to absolve me. Even Bhut' Vuyo himself would understand. He needs money as much as everyone else.

**In Newlands,** I find Carmichael waiting outside by the gate, pushing up against the grill surrounding the parking lot in Lini's building. Lini still isn't back from her pilgrimage to Muizenberg, yet, and the way Carmichael looks, it's hard for me to tell if the guy's high or crashing. It doesn't always go well with huffing Industrial like we do. Now, as I get closer to him, I struggle to place him between a state of excitement and agitation. So when I get to the gate, instead of asking him, I decide to do this, instead. I say, Carmichael, you have this face on I think you should see. Then I stand myself up against the grill. When my shoulders lean back on the fence, almost touching up

against Carmichael's, both of us start to laugh. We do this for a while, too, and go on for almost a full minute. Then Carmichael waves his hand to dismiss me like I was hoping he would.

No disappointment, here.

So we keep on laughing.

I get ready to go for another full minute when only half-way through, Carmichael gives up on the act and tells me how the ugly man has him feeling shaken.

This is my friend Carmichael.

He asks me if I don't feel the same way about it.

Carmichael goes, it's fine if you do.

He says to me, it's logical to feel that way.

So I tell him it's good to know I have his permission.

He nods, missing my meaning, and pulls out a smoke from his pocket and lights it with a broken matchstick. He cups his hand over the flame and waves the stub out before chucking it into the garden behind us. Then Carmichael drops his shoulders and I watch him as he lets out a sigh before taking in his first drag.

Man, he says after a while. Nathi, when I saw all that money coming in, I just started shaking, you know? I mean, I was back at my place and I had to stop typing for a while.

He pauses and looks up at the road.

The he asks, when's the new shipment coming in?

It's in a day or two, I tell him.

It's never exact.

Carmichael nods.

Of course I told the guy it was short notice, you know, and he said it was fine, that today was just a meeting between friends.

His cheeks pull inward as he drags on his cigarette, the balls on his thumb and index finger pinching the sponge in the filter as flat as an envelope. I watch the carcinogens leaving his body.

Once, pounded under the strength of a heavy come down buoyed by a wet, grey Sunday, the three of us had taken to mind the idea we could quit with the smoking and also move out of this city. We'd wanted to relocate to the Eastern Cape with our pill money, where we could harvest qhat near the Kei River, inside the infamous valley gorge that curved like a wide vein between the settlements of Bolo and Cathcart. The plant was protected and for a long time the situation had seemed benign between the farmers and the pickers, but recently, things had taken a turn for the worse when a van full of Somali's hadn't been suffered but shot down, peppered with lethal rifle rounds on a back road to King William's Town.

In Newlands, Carmichael blows out another drag from his insides. Then he tells me he has a few things he'd like to know from this guy who paid us. For one, why did he decide to pay us so much fucking money, and for two, what's all this kak about having to meet up with him? I mean really, Carmichael says, this guy really insisted.

Then he passes me the cigarette and I take a short pull, blowing smoke through my nose and through the grilled fence, before out into the open air over the parking lot.

So this is Carmichael and I.

The two of us stand in silence as the wind fusses the trees around us, its force snapping off the winter leaves and making them blanket the curb in shrouds of brown and orange. We watch as they scrub mutely against the navy tar, and where we are is Newlands, again, and according to Linireaux, our absent friend, the one who's still in Muizenberg and a phantom inside her flat, the way it gets quiet around this place, it isn't a coincidence.

I mean, I know, what else can you expect from Lini, right?

I haven't even told you this, but give her half the chance and she'll tell you how the total number of cemeteries still in operation around Cape Town is at a paltry 38, and without batting an eyelid, she'll tell you and anyone else who isn't counting along with her at the party that she's not including St. Peter's in Mowbray, here, which is actually in Obs, at the corner of Main and Anzio Road where half the plot's been turned into a strip mall. So it isn't surprising, then, to hear everything she says about this place. Just ask about the neighbourhood and Linireaux will tell you how Newlands belongs to the haunted sector of the Southern Suburbs. She'll tell you how the reason for all this silence is from Newlands being built on a one man grave site, a plot with a man called Helperus van Lier, who was an 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelist who spread the word in the Cape Colony until his death from consumption at 28, consumption being tuberculosis, of course, she'll always reminds you, a word which always makes me think of the woman who screamed at the nurses about her window period in Wynberg, and then of the illness itself, sometimes, as a 200 year old yellow cloud hovering over the tip of our continent, and of Helperus van Lier, too, who I presume was a non-reactive, sitting in a blue plastic chair next to Neil, smirking in one of our meetings as Ta Dennis takes his turn to speaks.

So I guess this is how it is, here.

Carmichael and I lean back and squeeze the filters on his cigarettes. Lini says piety has the ability to flow inside tap water and that even the surrounding plant life has no immunity against Calvinist ghosts. She tells us that this is why Newlands has always been a quiet place, and if you don't believe her, there's enough evidence around you that's stacked towards her favour.

I mean, even I know that much is true.

Just take a look around you, she says, and mostly she's right. Newlands has always taken the part of a cloister in the chaos of Cape Town. There's hardly ever a sound, here, where Lini stays, except for the vehicles driving passed us with their windows rolled up and their five doors locked. They move in both directions, and a few of them pull up in some of the driveways nearby. Others turn into cul-de-sacs that lead them into more tenement blocks, themselves perhaps hiding even more colonist priests under their bricks. This is where Carmichael and I go quiet and smoke.

There's this long moment that stretches out between us, and in the suburb's stillness, we try not to talk about the ugly man's money in overly precise terms. My friend Carmichael and I, we try not to talk about the way we're going with this when Lini returns from her trip to Muizenberg, and then, still leaning against the fence, Carmichael becomes the first one to break our silence.

This ugly description, he says to me.

So listen.

He says, hold on. Do you think it's code for something?

Maybe it's a euphemism, I say.

It could be, he agrees, but a euphemism for what?

I don't know.

I really don't, I say again to him.

Maybe it's another way of telling us he's a dangerous guy, you know? It could be he's scarred, I say. Maybe he's marked up after some fight he's had or an accident or something.

We fall back into another silence after I've said this.

I turn around and hook my fingers on the mesh fence.

For a long time, I pull my body back and hang on it that way.

There's a memory that visits me.



I used to cross my eyes on fences as a child, making the chain links leap out like holograms, but when I try it now, the optical illusion just makes my eyes hurt. So I uncross them and watch the wind pushing a green cardboard box, instead, turning over the bins in the far corner of the parking lot and knocking over a brown beer bottle that falls on its side and spews frothy dregs that wash across a white line under the canopy. I guess that's a handicap sign.

Then Carmichael starts talking again.

He says, hey, there's something I didn't show you guys.

I turn around and face him.

I didn't tell you and Lini this, he says, but this guy sent me copies of our ID's. He attached them in that email I sent you with our names and jobs on it, remember, but you know how Lini's phone is, so I took the jpegs off when I sent that forward.

Here, Carmichael says to me. Take a look at it, yourself.

I take his phone from him and start browsing through his images folder. It's true. We come up one after the other. The man did all three of our ID copies in colour.

Here's Carmichael.

Here's Lini.

Here's me.

Then Carmichael looks at me with his face pulled back in a wince. This is an expression I've since learnt to read as an apology from him.

The thing is, he says.

I hand him his phone before he goes on and he slides it back into his pocket.

The thing is, Carmichael says, it doesn't seem like we have much of a choice, here. We have this guy's money and we know he's

dangerous. He's not a cop, but he's got the reach of one. So we know he's free of the law, but we're not sure he's outside of it.

I nod.

It isn't hard to see Carmichael's point.

Simply by giving us his money, the ugly man has us bound.

Of course, there can't be any police for us, either, he says.

I nod.

Then he goes, look, I can't just walk into the bank and tell them to reverse the transaction, can I? We're lucky having that much money in the account hasn't raised any suspicion, to begin with. Now if I just go in there and start tampering with it? Then what? I mean, that's a sure fire way of getting people to ask me things I don't have the answers for. I mean really, the only option is to meet up with this guy and talk. I nod a bit more and tell Carmichael that he's right.

Then I let another moment pass before I tell him how I quit my job. He turns and looks at me with his eyes glazing over. He's still untangling himself from the calculation inside his head when I realize that it's his turn to nod. He does it with a noticeable energy, muttering under his breath as he pulls out another smoke from the soft pack.

He's trying to encourage me, I guess.

It's good.

I could use it.

So Carmichael keeps nodding, and as he does this, I notice an expression on his face I've never seen before. In this moment, he reminds me of a game show contestant I once saw as a child, this visibly poor man on Zama Zama who directed a similar smile to the host, Nomsa Nene, as well as the crowd, after choosing the wrong key for the grand prize. Then this passes and I see Carmichael in a story more his own. I read the expression settling through the lines and bags on his face as the limp cheerfulness of an irrevocable

introvert, a quiet child who covers up his reluctance at the hopes an average family has fostered on him. He's generous. Right now, Carmichael hands me the smoke so I can take down the first dap.

Then he tells me how he did the same.

I ask him, did the same what?

I quit my job, Carmichael says.

I look at him and he nods, absently.

Then he falls back on the fence, knitting his fingers together, and stretches his arms out to crack the knuckles on each hand.

I'm not going back, he says to me.

I stay quiet.

He says, anyway, tell me about your job, dude.

Well, I just left them, I say.

I feel slightly stunned by his news, but I carry on, anyway.

I say, I mean, this was a shitty job, you know. Like, after you told us about the money, I don't know. I just took off my cap and left. The strangest thing is that I hadn't even decided about accepting the money. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

Carmichael nods.

I know, he says.

Then the two of us go quiet another moment before Carmichael tells me how he didn't apply to have his contract renewed. The way he describes doing this, he says it was as a favour both to himself and his uncle. Carmichael tells me it was starting to get to the point where his uncle would spit whenever they ran into each other in the parking lot. When he mentions this, he tries to laugh and I have to look away.

I guess something else I haven't mentioned about Carmichael is that the reason he works for his uncle, it isn't so much out of a willingness to keep as close as he can to his family, but out

of a need to claw out of a heap of debt and cover for his rent. The way Carmichael's story goes is that early on during his working career, he bought himself this suit and a tie and then proceeded to ruin his resume by losing three jobs in succession to panic attacks. From the copy machine to the kitchen, Carmichael could be found curling up, sometimes fainting on carpet tiles or the buffed lino. Even though he was always seen getting back to work a week later, and always with an apology and sometimes a note for epilepsy, they always let him go. So it kept happening that way, until it came to his present situation, which has now become unchangeable. Over the phone, even though his former employers express their sympathy and well-wishes towards him, he's been described as too great a liability to keep on a professional payroll, and instead each employer suggests he seek out a program for special care.

This is what happened.

So eventually, after a series of emails, all of them dispatched with a great reluctance under the pressure of a bank loan he'd taken out to cover his rent, his uncle finally relented and put him up on a conditional intern's contract at his office in town. This is what led to his present situation, where Carmichael's probation period extended itself to a length of more than four years, and even though he has to renew his contract diligently after every ten to twelve months, he's never received the slightest mention of a pay increase. This is how Carmichael still sends a lot of his money to the bank. He tells me he hasn't had another attack in years, though, and he doesn't know why. Maybe it's the Industrial, I've thought to myself, more than once.

I squash the cigarette ember with my heel and kick it towards the pavement's gutter. It stops just shy of the curb's lip and tapers against a light breeze. Then I guess I don't need to ask him what he thinks of telling me next.

I don't know if I thought of myself as having already taken the money, he says. I just saw it there, when that SMS came, and I thought other things could happen, you know? So I sent the email.

I move away from the fence and settle myself down on the edge of the pavement. Carmichael doesn't follow me when I do this, and instead, the two of us speak to each other without using our faces. Then, a moment later, another car drives passed and when it clears out, I notice a figure standing in the house opposite West Ridge Heights, a man or a woman who looks at us with a focused intention, concealed behind a veil of curtain lace. When it seems like our eyes have met and locked for a long time, the figure takes a step back and draws the curtain closed between us.

I sit back and feel the tar and pebbles digging into my palms, and there, with still no sign of Lini and Newlands still being its usual haunted self, I take a breath and decide to tell Carmichael what it is I'm thinking. I tell him that the both of us, we've already decided to take the money from the ugly man, and then, without joining me on the pavement, and me without turning to face him as he speaks, Carmichael tells me that he knows we already have.

He tells me he hopes Lini has, too.

**Now I guess I've finally managed it.** Here's Bhut' Vuyo slipping out of my mind, again. Time moves forward and he starts to sink back into the years I left scattered between us. It's as much a relief as I expected it to be. I don't mention him to either Lini or Carmichael. My hand stops sweating around my cell phone.

**So here's Linireaux's place, again.** We're on our way up to her flat on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, and whatever the time is, the way it's moving forward and onward and always away from the three of us, we know we should be meeting up with the ugly man in the bar in Mowbray, that we stand on the brink of a new life that explains itself to the world with money, but between us, Carmichael, Lini and I, that isn't what we're doing. Instead, the three of us walk inside her flat, one after the other. Carmichael and I decide not to tell Lini what we've decided about the ugly man's money. Instead, both of us sit on Lini's floor in silence, facing each other on opposite ends of her coffee table. I guess by now I should tell you that the way Lini looks, the way she's finally here, inside West Ridge Heights, with her eyes animated, but staring off at distances beyond our heads, and with her posture straight and her shoulders level, it's that she isn't really here with us at all. The way she's standing and crouching inside her kitchen, Lini's not asking us any questions about the man. What we're doing instead is watching her rifle through her kitchen drawers, searching for any leftover Industrial in the flat. Occasionally, she looks up and tells us how her aunt Sylvia died today. She looks up and tells us how this happened just over three hours ago. This is what she says.

She says my aunt Sylvia's dead.

On the floor, Carmichael and I take in her information, but fail to process any recognizable reactions to it. When Linireaux tells us about her aunt dying on her bed at the nursing home, her face looks as if it's in the middle of an exhausting enquiry, as if dealing with a patch of bad network or a faulty dial-up modem. The way Lini looks, standing behind her kitchen counter with her blue head tilted down and to the left of her body, it's as if she's curious about the

occurrence of something unusual, but not insurmountable, as if only half her pupils had showed up for a field trip to a nearby dairy farm.

I close my eyes on the floor, and leaning against Lini's couch, I'm visited by another memory. It comes without warning and I see myself at eleven years old, again. It's a sunny Thursday afternoon and we're walking back to our school grounds from a routine swimming lesson in town. I see a brown snake slipping in a curve against the entrance of our chapel building, a snake at least as long as my forearm, and coming to a stop, I say, a snake. Everyone pauses for a brief moment to take this into consideration before, failing to see any evidence of my claim, they shrug and continue to walk up the small green dune to class. Unseen, the snake disappears between a bush and our face brick chapel, and as we walk for another few steps, I realize that I failed to recognize it as a threat, and that my reaction had discouraged my classmates from seeking protection from the reptile, which might've been lethal. This was the summer after I'd started getting teased about my knock-knees and scrawniness. My self-consciousness had turned me quiet, stoking up a strong sense of shame in how I looked to the world. I only came to life in the holidays, whenever I spent time with LT. He was fit and handsome and never seemed to notice my shortcomings. My voice grew loud and audacious with him, in a way it never did with other people.

Inside the living room, I open my eyes, again, and Lini nods as she rifles through more of her kitchen cabinets. The gesture seems to indicate the confirmation of an urgent internal detail, her head dipping up and down as she pulls apart her cabinets.

Eventually, Lini says, so I'm just there and we're picking these leaves and twigs, right?

The tone she uses sounds strained, but also casual.

She tells us, so this is my aunt and me, right?

Lini goes, this is how we're doing what we're always doing.

Carmichael and I listen.

Lini pauses as she goes through another cluttered cabinet.

She opens a coffee container and finding it empty, she shrugs and throws it over her shoulder.

Then she carries on with the search.

Picking twigs, she says to us, while out of view. It's as if she needs to confirm and stamp this particular detail into reality.

She says, that's what we're doing down, there.

She gets up and turns to the basin, where she plugs in a drain stopper and starts running out the hot water.

Carmichael and I sit still and watch her.

Lini removes a heap of cups and plates from the kitchen sink and stacks them up on her dish rack. Then she draws the short floral curtains on the kitchen rod and pushes the windows open to let in some air. From where the two of us are sitting, the water bangs hard against Lini's kitchen sink, and we watch her as she squeezes dishwashing liquid into the basin, her fist bringing the soap into a thick lather, and her elbow moving in small circles that push her arm out like a coat hanger. Eventually, Lini closes the tap and flicks the soap off her fingers. She wipes her brow with her wrist and what's left of the foam slides down her arm, splotching down on the kitchen floor. When this happens, Lini doesn't turn around to look at the two of us. Usually this would've been like spilling drops of acid, but right now, Lini just heels it into the floor.

The crazy thing, she says to me and Carmichael, is that I almost didn't even bother seeing my aunt today.

Her tone sounds both loud and incredulous, as if beamed behind a podium by a more charismatic woman, someone sharing a



humorous anecdote at a convention. Carmichael and I look at each other as she does this. We nod our heads repeatedly, as if aiming to emit a sound of comfort from the sight of our necks craning.

Then Lini goes, I know, right? She says, I was feeling lazy and okay, like I could just sit here, recover, and then I wasn't feeling that way at all. I had to see her.

She doesn't turn to us as she says this.

We face the length of her back.

Sitting against the sectional couch, I close my eyes, again.

I only hated Luthando for his looks once in my life.

It was just for half an hour.

I'd woken up one morning and my mother had looked at me with scorn and pity. She told me I'd probably be happy if I woke up as Luthando instead of myself. We were in the hallway, just before sitting down for our bowls porridge. I went quiet with shame, and as I walked passed her, I realized that she was right. I'd began to dress like him and adopt his mannerisms. Even at that age, I'd developed a healthy disdain for what I saw only in myself.

Later, I turned eleven, it was that same year, and I went to visit my grandmother in her village on the outskirts of the Eastern Cape. This was during one of my long school holidays, and I was there for two out of four weeks of my summer break. One evening, around the middle of December, after seeing a holiday friend off at an intersection down the road from my house, I walked back home and found a figure wearing a denim jacket and a pair of blue jeans standing in my way, a tall and thin man in his late twenties, who wore a black cap pulled low over his forehead. He blocked my path before pulling out a knife on me. The knife was wrapped in a bandanna printed in the pattern of the American flag, and as the man wordlessly took his stance, his knees bent forward and his feet set

apart, I understood from his silence that he had made the decision to kill me. When I tried to run past him, he shimmied sideways, where he blocked my path on the left, and when I tried to run passed him on the other side, his frame scuttled to where I stood on the right. I stopped moving, after a while, feeling on some level like I'd failed to find the solution for a test, and not without resignation, I turned around and walked back down to the intersection where I'd earlier seen my friend off. The man straightened himself up in the distance and walked a few paces down before turning right into this narrow lane. It was darkened, I could see now, when I raced after him to watch as his silhouette disappeared in the winding path, by the trees looming overhead from an adjacent schoolyard, behind which was an old village burial ground. I began to sprint home after that, but then, quickly growing tired, I decided to walk the rest of the way to my grandmother's house. I never mentioned the knife or the man to anyone, not even LT.

I open my eyes, now, and I'm back here, inside Newlands, again. Lini, my good friend, the one with the recently dead aunt in a nursing home in Muizenberg, she makes her way through a stack of dirty dishes, pumping her arms over the rim of her kitchen sink, and her questions spilling out of her in tones higher and even more alien to myself and Carmichael.

I watch her as she wipes her brow.

Then I watch her as she flicks the soap back into the basin.

Carmichael and I are still sitting here inside her living room, and with our knees half-drawn and our heads in constant rotation, I notice a water bottle lying on its side under Lini's coffee table. I reach for it and when I test the lid, it's shut tight, and so I pick it up and head over to the counter where I hand it over to her. Linireaux receives it from me with a nod, and after unscrewing the lid and

sniffing it to evaluate the potency of the glue from the smell, she starts huffing what's left inside of it, turning around so she can breathe the fumes on her own. Soon, the plastic bottle crinkles inward from the strength of her pulls and after a few seconds, Lini drops it in the basin and starts to wash it. I stand there for a moment and then I turn back to Carmichael before I hear her telling me to quit moving. I stop, and as I do so, Lini starts to speak to us, again, using what I register as the flat, but pleasant tone of her normal drawl.

In front of me, Carmichael looks up at this sound.

His eyes appear at the same time cautious and hopeful, suspended in hesitation, each one undecided on the meaning behind Lini's sudden shift in tone. With Carmichael still standing, there, Lini tells us she wants to know what time the ugly guy said he wants to meet us. She still has her back to us, and as she speaks, she continues to dry her cups and plates. I stand there and watch her.

Lini doesn't break away from her rhythm.

Her movements maintain a determined consistency, even though her hands now wash the knives at a slower rate than before. Then, with noticeable caution, she arranges the plates on the dish rack and bunches her shoulders in circular motions, as if wanting to draw them together, to crack out a cramp clutching her upper back.

This is when Carmichael gets up and walks over to the counter. Still uncertain about Lini's bearings, he takes his out his cell phone and directs his eyes on the small screen for diversion. Then he says to us the man said he wanted to meet today.

Carmichael, standing there behind Lini's kitchen counter with his phone up to his face, all the while noticing how Lini and I remain quiet, he says to us that's all the man said to him. Carmichael tells us he was too nervous to press the guy for a specific time.

He didn't offer me one, he says, and I didn't want to show too much complicity in our emails.

On the other side of the counter, Lini nods.

I make my way back to the couch.

I decide to leave Carmichael standing for whatever reason behind her. I close my eyes and hear Lini washing more dishes. I'm ten years old, this time, and I'm jumping off a moving car in Berlin.

Then, when I open my eyes, again, Lini says she wants to know what we think about all this, in any case. She tells us she's already decided on taking the money from whoever the man is, and as she says this, she reaches for her dishcloth, again. It's as if to conclude, she dries her hands and arms, and then, for the first time since letting us in, she turns around and faces me and Carmichael openly. Looking at her, my friend Lini, with her back leaning against the foam puffing out of her kitchen sink and her fingertips wrinkled, I can't tell if what she has on her face is a smile or an expression of loathing. The way I'm looking at her, all I know is that I don't want to see what she has on her face ever again. So I instruct my brain to lift my body off her floor and then Carmichael and I, the two of us both, we stand right in front of Lini. Then another short moment passes before Carmichael and I, the two of us both, we tell her how we've decided to do the same.

**On our way out**, we get a text from Julian about a Protest Party at his flat off Long Street. Outside, the sky has grown visibly dark. It looks thick and burdened with rain clouds, and as the three of us stand and wait for a taxi out on the main road, I get the feeling it could drop and press us down at any moment. Carmichael, Lini, and

I huddle in closer as we wait. We arrive about an hour later at Julian's. I realize that my life has become something I can no longer predict. Maybe this is how we're meant to experience the sway of being alive.

In the end, one cannot control existence.

Once there, I ring Julian's intercom and we get buzzed up to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, and on our way up, we stand side by side under the fluorescent lighting, quiet inside the empty elevator. For a moment, I think about how our bodies are moving up this old grey building off Church Street. To an architect's blueprints, the three of us would appear as something inversely ingested by concrete.

**On the 11<sup>th</sup> floor**, the elevator doors slide open and none of us mention anything about Aunt Sylvia, again. Carmichael and Lini walk out of the lift and I follow them. We don't mention our meeting with the ugly man, either, and Bhut' Vuyo has floated away from the corridors of my mind. Instead, the three of us make our way down a narrow steel landing, driven by the allure of an empty celebration. We walk along the south facing side of Julian's building, exposing ourselves to a square section of the parking lot and the ambient, whitish glow of the floodlights on Table Mountain. Maybe this is to be the rest of my life. Every life is unique and comprised of a strange confluence of events. I remember how a few years ago the stakeholders of this mountain had projected the image of a rhino's outline across the north facing side. This was in solidarity with the anti-poaching movement which was gaining traction at the time, calling to attention how all five species of the creature were dwindling

out of existence. In the previous year, poachers had slaughtered almost seven hundred rhinos, sawing off their horns and selling them to eastern countries for traditional medicine. The rhinos had continued to die, and a day after the lightshow, the stakeholders had gone back to charging five thousand rand to have the floodlights cast on the face. Various organizations now paid for their services, facilitating photo opportunities for corporate sponsorships events. Sometimes they had leadership conferences, and at other times it was a wealthy tourist. Carmichael, Lini and I could afford it, now.

Julian's door stands just a metre away from the three of us.

It's marked with a rusting silver number, an eleven hundred, with a vanished second zero. From the outside, we can hear music and voices mulling together inside the hallway, while shadows move across the dimpled window next to the door. We draw closer and notice a couple sitting together on the fire escape, just a few steps down from the landing on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, and both of them are holding a bottle of beer and sharing a cigarette. I turn to face my friends and Lini and Carmichael seem focused on getting inside the party. None of us say anything at the door. The music seems to get louder when I knock on Julian's door.

The weather seems to grow colder, but it doesn't bother us.

Eventually, I hear Julian's footsteps drawing towards us on the wood panelled hallway. Looking back down, again, I notice that the couple, both of whom wear these black winter jackets and bright pastel coloured beanies, and it's just a month from spring, have a large cardboard cut-out leaning over the steps behind them. The cut-out has been illustrated with the anatomy of a man and a woman, and above the couple, over their faces and over their bright beanies, the moon looks like a disc, a coin fashioned out of a scoop of dry ice

flakes. It's an image that stays with me. The night seems to promise us vitality and beauty.

So Julian opens the door with his face painted silver.

He's sober.

So tall, the three of us have to look up to see him grin.

Hey, guys, he says, waving us in. Come on in.

We do.

Carmichael, Lini, and I, file into the hallway and mill around a while before we meander into the kitchen, our default location when attending an acquaintance's party. Walking in, I see cardboard boxes scattered on the kitchen floor, and the three of us try to walk around them as Julian comes after us in the hallway. He pats his hands together, seeming slightly flushed, having had to struggle with the latch on his door. I think of the couple sitting outside with their cut-out. Maybe they've started their own party, I decide.

Maybe one's whole life could be the start of one's own party.

Inside the kitchen, Julian begins to impress me.

His confidence feels infectious.

He waves his hand across the vista of his kitchen counter. From one end to the other, the surface looks packed with a grove of raw vegetables, and then between them, towers of clear and differently coloured liquor bottles. Then further down, close to a window on the left wall, the sink overflows with a stack of dirty dishes. I realize I've been in and out of flats like this for most of my adult life. I've been stoned or drunk, that's what I've done with the life that was taken from Luthando and given to me.

I resolve to indulge like it's my first time.

One can make a life out of this and it's just fine, I say feeling calm, picturing a string of parties for each night.

We went to a farm, earlier, Julian says over the music.

He waves his hand over the counter, again, and says, please, guys, help yourselves. Julian says, you know how it goes. Here, everyone shares everything.

We nod to him to indicate that we know.

Nice party.

This comes from Carmichael and we nod to that, too.

The three of us take out three quarts of beer and a bottle of wine that we picked up from the Tops near Gardens. I open the bottle and rinse three coffee mugs out in the sink for us. The brown water inside the basin looks at least a day old, and I yank the chain to unplug the stopper keeping it up. Then I stand there for a while, watching as the fluid drains out in small, silent increments. It holds an inspiration for me. This is who I am. Bhut' Vuyo and them will have to drag my corpse from these floors.

I start hearing Julian snort.

He's standing behind me.

He claps his hands together and says, well, do you like it?

I turn around and he's pointing at his face.

It looks sprayed on with silver spray-paint.

This mascara he's got on causes a strong contrast that makes his eyes appear pressed out, bulging as if in shock and annoyance. It reminds me of the eyes you see in clinics with pictures of people with proptosis, a sign of an overactive thyroid condition, and sometimes a symptom of what I have. Standing in front of us, and grinning inside his kitchen, Julian sways slightly in place, achieving this eerie rhythmic trembling, as if he were a supporting character excerpted from a malfunctioned video game, an extra, now stranded and awaiting instruction in this less tractable environment. We spend a few seconds looking at him like this before we fold. Since none of us can guess what he's meant to be, Lini decides to



ask him what the paint represents. She leans over the kitchen counter and appears to relax as Carmichael pulls out a carrot stick and inspects it. Then, when Carmichael breaks off the top stem of the carrot, I open a bottle of wine and pour us each a coffee mug of merlot. Screwing the lid back on, I hear Carmichael snapping a bite from the carrot stick and chew. I laugh because with Carmichael never bothers washing anything he puts inside his body.

In the meantime, Julian says to us, the future.

We follow his gestures as he narrates.

He says to us, here's what I want you to think about.

I hand Carmichael and Lini their mugs and taking a sip from mine, I lean back and wait for the host to start his speech. To me, as a result of his make-up, Julian's excitement appears feral and unhinged, tonight. Even though his overall bearing suggests that of a friendly host, his eyes make him appear spiteful and brim, almost, with a sparkling cruelty. It's intense, but Julian isn't a bad guy.

For example, the reason he calls them Protest Parties, it's because at some point during the night, he locks his front door and everyone inside has to pass out on his floor or on the couches. The guy goes as far as to offer his own bed and his bathtub, and the next day, he organizes the people left inside his flat into a small crowd outside the parliament gates. Then afterwards, when they disperse from the government building, they return to Julian's flat in good spirits, everyone feeling buoyed out of their come downs by a communal, altruistic activity. Once back inside his flat, everyone who's still there has a party with whatever's left on Julian's counter, and this usually goes on until the early evening, at which point they begin to taper off, looking for sleep in their own apartments, or to recover for jobs or the search for them. On the ones we went on, Carmichael, Lini and I, the few Julian put on for people at the

beginning of this year, he cited an increasing dissatisfaction with the city's stance on economic freedom, and when we woke up the next morning, he suggested that we march to the statue of Nelson Mandela erected on Roeland Street, all of us dressed up in nothing but tailored garbage bags. This was in the summer, sometime in February, and everyone had a bag on them. Each of us passed around two pairs of scissors and we worked under the morning light. When we walked out, afterwards, none of us had hated it.

Tonight, Julian says he's taken an issue with bio-technology.

Specifically, he tells us, his focus is centred on GM food and stem cell research. We listen as he talks, and I notice how Lini's already drained her wine. I take her mug from her and fill it up along with mine. Still chewing on his carrot, and standing on Lini's left hand side, Carmichael seems to take his time. I decide to leave him alone.

Then Julian carries on with his speech.

He tells us how this year, he's doing something bigger than all his previous marches. Still standing in the kitchen with us, his eyes push out of his skull while his body moves in slight tremors, and Julian, who's our host, he tells us that this year he's deciding to be more effective with crowd energy. He walks toward the cardboard flaps on the kitchen floor and starts picking them up piece by piece over the tiles, describing to us all the while how this year, the idea he's working on, it's to compound different conflicts into single, stronger marches.

Like needles left inside the city's veins, Julian says.

He says, I mean, everything is synced now, isn't it?

He says, it's all synthesis, everywhere you look, and I nod.

I lower my head and sip on my watery wine.

Lini used to be classmates with him, Julian.

They attended the University of Cape Town together and both of them received their MFA's before Lini became a teacher. I remember once reading an interview with Julian in the arts section of a local weekly. When the interviewer asked him whether or not his marches were protests in earnest or performance art, Julian had passed on the question, and after reading the article to the end, I'd googled him and watched a one-minute YouTube clip where he played a prank on his agent in a gallery. The gallery walls had large framed photographs of his marches and the video ended with Julian wearing a wine-stained polystyrene cup on his head. It faded to black over the smile he has now. The three of us stand and stare at him.

He goes, I'll tell you all about it, later.

To us, Julian says, you're staying for lock-up, right?

Lini smiles and this makes Julian nod.

He says, what am I saying? Of course you are.

Then he turns around and walks out to greet a group of people on the living room. Lini turns to me with her brow creased.

She says, how bad do you think the whole stem cell thing is?

Recently, the government passed legislature sanctioning uninhibited research on the human embryo. It was said that the first specimens would be received from rape victims who tested positive for HIV. Previously, the research had been restricted to embryos no older than fourteen days. Now a new incentive has been provided. Most articles published about the government usually have figures of over a million rand somewhere in the body of the text. It doesn't take much to guess what the incentive in most cases is.

I don't tell Lini what I think.

I mean, what I think about is money, of course, and what I tell her instead is that I don't know. I can't tell if she's ready to talk about the money, yet, and so I shrug and tell her we should go out to the

balcony. I tell them it's a party. They both nod, and so I fill our mugs up with more wine, and then the three of us walk out of the kitchen and into the lounge. I guess I don't have to say how the music here is loud as in loud. It's all exactly right. It pushes everything else from my brain, turning it into wisps.

**Next, we're inside the living room,** and what happens here brings everyone closer to watch. First here's Julian, smiling from the head of his coffee table, and he removes his ANC button from his black blazer. He turns it over to take out about fifteen tabs of acid concealed in the back. Then his hands return to his pockets and chewing on his lip, he tells everyone, you all know what do. It's a thing with him. So this everyone watching, and at this point in time, all of them focus on Onel, on Wee Dee, on Krishen, and on this crust punk girl called Proxy, and on this older guy, Ted, who's supposedly this lapsed pharmacist, but can't write anyone any scripts. Then in order, around the table, everyone raises their right hand. This is when Julian stops chewing his lip and smiles up at us. He raises his own hand and then everyone watching, at this point, our focus is on DA, on IFP, on ANC, on PAC, and on Undecided. Then everyone watching at this point, our focus is on the faces of five registered voters, each of them smiling with two tabs of acid melting under their tongues.

I **slide**, toke, huff, sip, touch and slip. Then my skin feels like tarpaulin over someone else's body.

I **have very little regard for Nietzsche**, this one guy wearing a fitted leather jacket says to a girl leaning up against the white, stippled wall. I agree with him, instantly. Where we are is Julian's balcony, where there's a marijuana cigarette doing the rounds and a leaking pipe that moves from one hand to the other, scattering ash all over his skidded tiles. He can afford it, so Carmichael, Lini and I mingle outside with Julian's followers, taking hits from the marijuana and chasing them with pulls from our mugs of wine. From where we're standing, our view of Cape Town is a maze of brick walls, and a checkers board of abandoned office lights. We talk and hold up our coffee mugs, the breeze feeling as tactile as ice around our fingertips. Then the exhaust fumes waft off the tar, together with the rubber baked between the buildings during the daytime, making it easy to think of the ozone layer, as Carmichael once propositioned to us, might be Earth's massive garbage lid. I agree with him, too. Julian looks like a deep water mutant, he says to us, now.

Lini and I laugh.

We both nod at this.

Carmichael has an eye for accuracy, sometimes.

For clothes, Lini's wearing a green hood over her blue hair, today. The strings on the sides of her face are pulled and knotted under her chin, and about Julian, she tells us that he asked her about her fucking documentary, again. Of course, this isn't uncommon from artists. I haven't mentioned that Lini has an audio documentary, by

the way. She edits it for roughly two hours every second month or so, and it's about this guy called Smangaliso from Khayelitsha, he quit his job and volunteered to live on 8 rand a day with his community. He's from the same Site Dennis and his wife have a house in, and on clips Lini plays back for us at West Ridge Heights, you can hear the difference in his tone at the beginning of the experiment and then after the passing of a month. Lini, who planned to paint a portrait of him through the recorded interview, said he lost 12 kilograms in less than three weeks. In a tired voice, he says he hasn't robbed anyone, yet. I remember how the three of us were huffing, once, when his voice came through the speakers and said he hadn't used any drugs. On the balcony, now, I turn to face Lini.

I don't remember if I applauded Smangaliso for his resolve, so I start doing it now. I wasn't paying that much attention with Julian earlier, I shout to Lini while clapping.

What did you tell him?

I ask, are you still working on your album?

I don't know, she says. They all just started getting sick. He has a little brother, you know, and after a while, it got too much and he had to go back to work. There was a newspaper article and they let him in because of that. They said he was a good man, that he would bring in business. Lini digs inside her pocket and takes out a soft pack of filters. This car speeds down the narrow lane below us, and as it nears a four way stop, its headlights illuminate a blue and orange mural on the building opposite.

Hey, Lini says, I didn't know Phaze had a painting, here.

Me neither, I say.

Then the three of us lean over the railing. When the car pulls off, the mural disappears again and we pass around Lini's cigarette in the following silence. Some guy behind us asks for a skyf and Lini

takes out another smoke and hands it over to him. Everyone shares everything, as Julian says. Since our wine is almost finished, we drink what's left of it in small sips. Lini says she can't believe these people think they're being recruited for something by Julian. She tells us how Julian has this impressionable army. Like, really fucking impressionable, she says, and we laugh.

I finish my wine and shake the last drop out on my tongue.

You know, Lini explains, I actually like my job.

Carmichael and I both take turns looking at her.

She says, no, I do, but then there's all this shit that happens between it, you know? I mean, what's even happening here, at this flat, right now? Lini says, my aunt just died in Muizenberg, today, and now I'm on a balcony listening to people talk kak about Nietzsche. I watch the lights silhouetting Lini's face as she speaks.

For a moment, we go quiet.

Death is death, isn't it Bhut' Vuyo?

Then Carmichael leans over her and says Nietzsche's the Nazi one, isn't he? He directs his voice across to the guy who's speaking to the girl on the wall, and over Lini's shoulder, he says to him that no one likes Nietzsche, anymore. Carmichael says to the guy he should speak about someone else. Then Carmichael goes, you're upsetting my friend, and in response, and I suppose not wanting to cause any trouble, the guy smiles and gives Carmichael a salute with his left hand.

When he says, aye, aye, captain, the words stick with me.

I feel like saying it back, so I do.

Lini rolls her eyes.

Then the people in the huddle start mumbling I 'n I and Selassie I in the pantomime of soulful Rastafarians. The laughter

starts from a chuckle and grows out into a clamour behind us. Then everyone takes more methamphetamines.

I feel awake.

I could fold the sky this city sleeps under.

Lini leans over the railing, a moment later, focusing her eyes on nothing in particular. Then she hangs back again, in the same way I did earlier on the fence at West Ridge, and she says we'll be thirty in like two or three years, give or take. I know it doesn't mean anything, she says, sounding tired, but what are we doing, here?

We're alive, I say to her. That's what we're doing. We're alive and I'm dying.

I begin to feel annoyed with her.

Then Lini stares blankly at the back of the building in front of us, and still hanging on the railing, she asks if this is all we'll ever do with ourselves. This is when I take a look at Carmichael.

Then I tell her about the Movie Monocle.

Will that do?

When I'm almost done, Carmichael joins me and we both tell her how we quit our jobs, today. We're still speaking when a siren sounds from the distance, an ambulance and not a police van, probably an OD, and we see its red light blinking briefly before melting between the buildings. Lini doesn't say anything.

So I tell her she's right.

Carmichael joins me again and we both tell her how we agree. I mean, it's not just about the money, I say to her.

Lini she nods for a while.

Then she goes, we're at the age, now, I think, where we're probably too old to trace back everything that went wrong with us.

I turn away, but she continues. I wonder how Bhut' Vuyo can stand at all places in my life at once.



To me and Carmichael, Lini says when you're a teen, everything is easier. People say it's the hardest time you get to have, and it's really shit, we all know that, but it's easier, too. You can just rebel, or maybe buy something to rebel with. Fuck, I don't know, she says. You've got enough clubs to choose from. Now all we have is this option. To do something that matters or nothing at all, and we're here because we tell ourselves nothing matters. When you're young you can evade and pretend you've never been hurt and it's the world that's at fault. We aren't altruistic, though, and neither is Julian. He makes fun of everything we and none of us care what happens to the world. I don't know, she says, after a while.

She pauses and makes a face like she's trying to recall a long lost index of information, the way a human face might look when trying to access a corrupted computer file.

Lini says she can't finish the thought she's having.

She sighs and says, look, guys, anything I say about this will come out contrived, won't it? I mean, I don't want to mislead anyone, here. Then she releases the rail before she turns around and looks at the two of us, at me and Carmichael, and she says, well, let's go to Mowbray, then. On the balcony, the way Lini looks, she's got this stiff smile on her face, and in response, all Carmichael and I can do is nod at her in silence. I feel my high disintegrating. Then that's what the three of us do. We turn around and head towards Mowbray. Bhut' Vuyo expands in my head once again.

**Close to a minute later**, Julian spots us making our way down his wood panelled hallway. His new eyes give him vision everywhere. He

follows after Carmichael and spreads his arms up in a display of mock anguish, decrying what he calls an act of gross betrayal on our part. Somehow, when I look at the guy's face, this time, his eyes appear less angry and unwell as they did before. As we walk passed the kitchen, he says we should tell him why we're leaving so soon. Julian says we can't be off, already, surely, since everything's just started. I haven't even thought of doing the lock-up, yet, he says.

Then Julian goes, guys come on.

So we stop and turn around to look at our host.

He's got this big grin on his face and it's hard to tell how much he means it. Lini tells him that she's got something that needs to be done, and when he looks down at the two of us, Carmichael and I, she says we're helping her with her with her circumstances.

So Julian shakes his head.

He says, okay cool, a bonafide team. Ek smaak.

He walks passed me and Lini.

He works the latch on the door.

That's what I keep stressing in my work, Julian says. Like, a lot of it's about harnessing the energy of unity, the power of numbers. Sorry, he says to us, again. This door's being a total naai.

He struggles over the lock, again.

He has to lean to try and get it open.

So the three of us wait.

There's still laughter coming in from his balcony.

I can hear it over the music and when I look over Carmichael's shoulder I notice the Nietzsche guy and the leaning girl walking back inside, hand in hand, and both of them are giggling and a little shaky on their feet. Then the Nietzsche guy leads the girl to Julian's bookshelf and pulls down a paperback I can't make out the cover of. He pages through the book and stops to point out a

passage to the girl. She starts laughing and turns her face away. Then the girl turns her face back again and he hands the book to her. The girl grins as her eyes move across the page, absorbing the text, and when she pushes the book back into the shelf, the Nietzsche guy moves in towards her and they kiss. Then the two of them stand like that for a while, wobbling, kissing and keeping each other in balance, and Julian gets the door to unlock and holds it open as Carmichael, Lini and I file out into the landing. Looking back, I see the couple by the book shelf pulling apart, again, still grinning, and when we step outside, the other couple from the fire escape comes running up towards the door. The girl carries their placard like you see in images of Jesus bearing the cross or something, and laughing, the guy says, Julian, dude, you locked us out. He turns around and greets us, hey, and we nod back. Then Carmichael and Lini walk down towards the elevator as the girl pushes passed Julian.

I notice that she's laughing too.

It's really a blast for them, I guess, this enormous joy factory.

Myself, I'm what you expect.

I'm standing here facing a major come down.

So Jules, the girl says, we thought you'd started without us.

I wouldn't do that, our host says. Look, it's just my door.

He starts shaking his head and lets out a sigh.

This lock gives kak loads of trouble, bru.

Then he shrugs and says, anyway, come inside, guys.

Seeing me still standing, there, Julian nods.

So I return the acknowledgement.

I guess I just wanted to get another look at the couple inside.

Now I turn around and jog towards my friends.

Carmichael and Lini hold the lift doors open for me.

Then they draw shut and we descend.

Inside the elevator, Lini draws herself towards me, and places her head flat against my shoulder. The elevator grumbles and she says there's nothing to envy about this place or the people inside it, Nathi. It figures that now she's done with beating me down, she's consoling me. Lini, with her head against my shoulder, she tells me that the way everything up here looks, it's only this way for a few hours before the morning breaks. She says, there's nothing that's ever really here to begin with, and in response, I nod because she's right and also because I want her to be right, I guess. I look up at the reflective silver ceiling as we drop towards the Earth, and at the fluorescent light as it falls on Lini's blue hair. I can feel her hand clutching my shoulder as we reach the ground floor. We wait for the doors to open, and then we step outside Julian's building. To an architect's blueprints, this time around, me and my friends, we would look like something being excreted by concrete.

**The three of us get on the move, again.** Carmichael, Lini and I sit side by side on a taxi to Mowbray, and up front, behind a cracked windscreen and a Get Rich or Die Trying sticker, our driver shifts his stick back up another gear and we hurtle through Woodstock with rising speed, the Hi-Ace gliding passed a U-Save store, a hair salon, and this internet café that pawns second hand jewellery.

Here's my brain being a bitch, again, Lini says.

There's a pause as she raises a hand to scratch the bridge of her nose. Then she takes off her green hoodie and says, it's doing this thing where my aunt isn't dead yet.

Lini says, I don't think I want it to be doing this, again.

The way the three of us are packed inside this taxi, we're sitting side by side in the back row and Lini's doing all the talking between us. I keep bumping my head against the window. Lini tells us about her aunt and mother. She tells us this is how she dealt with her mother dying.

Then she says, this isn't about either one of them, though.

Like we're supposed to, Carmichael and I nod.

Our silence expands and suffocates the taxi.

I put my hand over the fingers Lini has on my leg.

**The driver stops just before we drive into Obs**, dropping off an elderly couple who've paid just to get as far as Salt River. Then the door slides shut and we start moving down the main, again. Through my window, the sky looks dull and impenetrable, as if it were the dusty screen of a malfunctioned cell phone, and Lini asks if we need to make a plan. Lini, she asks if we need to strategize how we're ending it all, tonight.

Carmichael and I laugh at this.

I thought I could go in first, I tell them, while you guys wait for me outside, I say. I'm the one who's half-way dead, anyway.

Saying this, I realize I'm still high.

I suppress a need to laugh.

I add, but then I couldn't see the point. Champs on Vic is this public place, isn't it?

They both nod and I go on.

I say, I think we do need a strategy for how we talk to him, though. We should give out as little information as we can, right? Let's make him show us everything he knows.

They listen and agree.

Then Carmichael goes, he's got the reach to know what he wants to know. He tells Lini about the ID copies.

Then he shows her his phone.

That's the point, I say back to him.

I say, look, I don't think we need to spell out anything for this guy. I know he's made it so the cop thing is unlikely, but we still can't be sure about it. We don't need to go into the details of our operation. We're just there to hear what he wants from us. We can tell him we're getting the pills the day after tomorrow. Hopefully, that's all there is to this.

I'm surprised by what sounds like my presence of mind.

Then our taxi pulls over at the McDonald's in Obs.

We park opposite the Pick 'n Pay in St. Peter's Square, Exhibit A out of Lini's two broken graveyards. I look at her, expecting a smart quip, but she doesn't turn around to comment like she usually would.

Instead, we just sit and wait.

Five minutes pass as we watch people get off.

Then the gaartjie leaps out and calls for more passengers from the main road. He shouts out Claremont, Wynberg, and repeats, his voice like an echo without oscillation. I watch him cross over the main road, looking for passengers leaving the parking lot in front of St. Peter's Square. The sky seems to darken as the seconds climb atop each other.

They topple and build.

Turning back, I tell my friends I can't think of anything else.

I shrug my shoulders.

Dude, I'm sold, Carmichael says to me.

He seems nervous. This is how Carmichael talks when he's nervous. I watch him as he pounds a fist into his palm.

Solid by me, he announces.

Then Lini nods to whatever this means and I hear myself sigh. What else is there?

There's nothing else we can do, right now, I say to them.

I really am sober.

The worst thing that can happen in this story, Lini adds, is that someone dies, and that's already kind of happened, hasn't it? She shrugs and stares ahead as Carmichael and I go quiet. Then from across the road, the gaartjie says to someone, Claremont, sister? He doesn't look that much older than we are. He's wearing a pair of blue overall pants and a black woollen beanie. He says to someone, going brother? Then I watch him as he skips between people, hefting his coin sack and offering to help carry people's packages. I'm thinking to myself, this is our last stop before we get off in Mowbray, and in my head, all I want is this guy to go on doing this calling forever. It's only natural, then, that he comes back as soon as I think of this, and it isn't very long at all before we're on the move, again, all three of our necks stretched taut for whatever guillotine's waiting.

**On the move, again,** the three of us sit side by side on a taxi headed to Mowbray, while up front, behind a cracked windscreen and a Get Rich or Die Trying sticker, our driver shifts his stick back up another

gear and we hurtle through Woodstock with rising speed, the Hi-Ace gliding passed a U-Save store, a hair salon, and an internet café with second hand chains.

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There's a pause as she raises a hand to scratch the bridge of her nose, and then she takes off her green hoodie and says, it's doing this thing where my aunt isn't dead yet.

I don't think I want it to be doing this, again, she says.

The way the three of us are packed inside this taxi, we're sitting side by side in the back row and Lini's doing all the talking between us. I keep bumping against the window. Lini tells us about her aunt and mother. She tells us this isn't about either one of them.

Like we're supposed to, Carmichael and I nod.

Then I put my hand over the fingers Lini has on my leg.

Then our driver stops just before we drive into Obs, dropping off an elderly couple who've paid just to get as far as Salt River. Then the door slides shut and we start moving down the main road, again. Through my window, the sky looks dull and impenetrable, as if it were the dusty screen of a malfunctioned cell phone, and Lini asks if we need to make a plan. Lini, she asks if we need to strategize how we're ending it all, tonight. Carmichael and I laugh at this.

Then I tell her, I thought I could go in first, while you guys wait for me outside. I'm the one who's half-way dead, anyway, but then I couldn't see the point. Champs on Vic is a pretty public place.

They both nod, so I go on.

I think we do need a strategy for how we'll talk to him, I say. We should give out as little information as we can. Let's make him show us everything he knows, first, right?

They listen and agree.



Then Carmichael says, he's got the reach to know what he wants to know. He tells Lini about the ID copies.

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That's the point, I say back. Look, I don't think we need to spell out anything for this guy. I know he's made it so the cop thing is unlikely, but we still can't be sure about it. We don't need to go into the details of our operation. We're just there to hear what he wants from us, right? We can tell him we're getting the pills the day after tomorrow. Hopefully, that's all there is to this whole thing.

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I shrug my shoulders.

Dude, I'm sold, Carmichael says to me.

He seems nervous. This is how Carmichael talks when he's nervous. I watch him as he pounds a fist into his palm.

It seems solid by me, he says to us.

Then Lini nods.

I hear myself sigh.

What else is there?

There's nothing else we can do, right now, I say to them.

The worst thing that can happen in this story, Lini says in a monotone, is that someone dies, and that's already kind of happened, hasn't it? She shrugs and stares ahead as Carmichael and I go quiet. From across the road, the gaartjie says to someone, Claremont, sister? He's this young guy, and wearing a pair of blue overall pants and a black woollen beanie. He says to someone, going brother? Then I watch him as he skips between people, hefting his coin sack and offering to help carry their packages. I'm thinking, this is our last stop before getting off in Mowbray, and in my head, all I want is this guy to go on doing this forever. It's only natural, then, that the guy comes back as soon as I think of this, and it isn't very long at all before we're on the move, again, our necks stretched taut for whatever guillotine's waiting for us.

**Eventually, we get off on Station Road** and walk past three lit up hair salons by the main strip. I've heard this place being called the northern hair district, before, and most of the salons are still open, even this late at night. I have the sensation of slipping into a vacuum. My uncle recedes from my mind. Their windows throw yellow puddles of light onto the curb, and each shop draws us a path towards the four-way stop just before the Shoprite, the blurry line that changes this part of town into another suburb, before Rosebank itself transforms into Rondebosch.

I guess this is how all this happens with us.

For the entire block, Carmichael, Lini and I walk in silence. No one makes mention of wanting to change their minds and we take the left turn when it finally comes up. We head east just before the

police station on main road, and then the three of us go deeper and deeper into Mowbray, and closer and closer to the bulk order man. I imagine him as a mercenary, but like I said, I guess this is how this happens with us. Right now, here's Carmichael, Lini, and I, and what we're doing is walking down St. Peter's Road. Right now, here's Carmichael, Lini, and I, and what we're doing is walking into Champs on Vic

**We decide to start off at the bar.** Naturally, this isn't a surprise. Carmichael and Lini take up seats on the high stools and I follow up behind them, each of us sitting down and facing straight ahead at the packed beer fridges. With my buzz completely gone, I begin to suspect that this is a trap. Maybe Bhut' Vuyo has found that I can be lured by money. That I have a price and I'm easy.

We sit down facing the vodka and whiskey bottles, my eyes dry as their glide over all the brandy and sherry they have here at the bar. It's a dump, this place, Carmichael says to my left, but even he admits he wouldn't call Champs on Vic a small bar.

I mean, that's fair enough. You just have to take a look around at the place to tell it isn't.

Even this late and in our state.

I turn my head towards the other end, away from the entrance. Inside, there's a woman with bleached hair tends to the bar. She's standing at the other end of the counter, facing towards the right wall, and has her back turned towards us by the door. From where we're sitting, we can see her typing on her cell phone as she raises her head to laugh along with this guy in a cowboy hat,

someone's dad, about sixty years old. He's wearing a brown suede blazer with a white button up shirt. There's this soccer game on and I guess everyone seems lobotomised by that. It's a Chiefs and Pirates match. The music coming out of the jukebox is barely audible, unanimously ignored.

So for a few moments, Carmichael, Lini and I just sit here.

We don't turn around to see if there's anyone's watching us.

I remind myself to take in normal breaths, which reminds me of Olive from Lavender Hill, the damage that makes her breathing whistle out of her soft lungs.

What would you drink on your last day on Earth?

Of course, this is another gem from Linireaux.

I mean, timely as always.

This is what she asks me and Carmichael.

Lini says, what if Last Life was moved up to now? Like, tonight, Lini says us. If tonight was your Last Life night? When she says this, she plays with the strings tied into a soft knot under her chin, her lips curving into a weak smile, and her eyes sliding from one side of the room to the other, a habit I've known to read as agitation from her.

Jesus, Carmichael says.

He's apparently taken to mulling it over on his mind.

Me, I choose not to.

There's enough going on as it is.

From my stool, I turn around and face the bartender. She doesn't look that much older than the three of us sitting here. For clothing, she's wearing this tight sky blue halter top and a pair of stonewashed jeans with black sandals. She's about to turn around and look at us, when the suede cowboy says something else to interrupt her duties.

Success, of course.

She throws her arms up and starts laughing, again.

The bartender places her phone on the counter and holds her hands over her mouth. Then her shoulders give out these small convulsions of joy, and behind us, the headless roar at another missed goal on the screen.

I don't think I have any more money on me, I say.

Me neither, Lini confirms.

Then Carmichael pats his pockets and nods that he might.

This time around, all three of us turn towards the bartender.

From the other end of the counter, she starts clapping her hands, again, expressing another moment of disbelief at yet another plot point in the cowboy's story. This is supposed to be our bartender, by the way. We watch her as she picks up her phone and speaks into it. Eventually, she turns around to scan the room. Then, finally seeing us, she approaches our stools, her one hand wiping down the counter while the other holds up her phone. Carmichael takes out his money and places it on the rubber spill mat. He asks me and Lini what we'd like to order.

I look up at the shelves.

Indeed, what to order.

The nature of my state evades me, dipping in and out of soberness as it pleases. I hold on to the counter with my fingertips.

I don't know. Probably beer, I say to him.

I ask Lini if she wants beer.

She nods.

Carmichael buys us three quarts.

He hands the money over and when our drinks arrive, we take small sips from tall brown bottles. The bartender comes back with Carmichael's change, a combination of notes and coins, and as

she places his money on the counter, she asks us if we're here to meet up with someone. Looking at us, she sighs with boredom at our delayed response. Then she repeats her question until Carmichael says yes. Carmichael says that's what we're here for.

Then Lini and I nod in support.

Well, he's upstairs, the bartender says, sounding bored. That man, the strange one, the handicap, he told me to tell you he's waiting for you. He has the floor blocked off, but you can tell Vincent at the door and he'll let you in. Tell him you're the three guests.

Then, when she's done, she shrugs and we thank her as she sends off another text on her cell phone.

Then she walks back to the cowboy and he beams.

I swivel on my stool and take a look at the timers still absorbed by the game. If he was here, the ugly man would've stepped up to us, by now. Either myself, Carmichael or Lini would've noticed him. I turn back to the bar and drink slowly from my quart.

So this ou booked the whole floor, Carmichael says.

The whole floor, Lini echoes after him.

My brain doesn't give me anything to join them with.

So I just ask them if we should finish the beer or just go up.

We need to recount our strategy, Carmichael says.

Yes, we need to do that, says Lini.

She says, let's decide on a plan.

We shouldn't volunteer any information to him, I offer.

Should we mention seeing the money, Carmichael says.

Not until he mentions it first, I say.

Then Lini takes a long sip from her beer and we follow her.

Well, fuck it, she says after a while. I feel like I'm not afraid of this guy, anymore, you know? Lini pushes back on the counter like

she's preparing to get up, and I take another sip from my beer and place it back on the counter.

We've really done all the planning we can do.

I tell my friends as much.

Carmichael agrees.

In my head I think, if he's Bhut' Vuyo then he's Bhut' Vuyo.

We just have to keep a cool head with this guy, Carmichael says. Then he gets up and stretches his arms out.

I need to take a leak, he tells us. Don't sneak off without me.

Sure, like you'd mind that, Carmichael, Lini says.

Despite her try, the three of us don't manage anything close to a laugh. Then Carmichael takes a gulp from his quart, wipes the foam off his lips, and stalks off into the bathroom. Left behind, Lini and I sink back into our seats.

Then she turns to me and says, Nathi, are you afraid?

I tell her I don't know.

I honestly don't.

My head does its wavering thing and I take another look around the room. Then I say to her I really don't.

Me neither, Lini says, after a while.

She says, I have no idea what to think, anymore.

Then the ghouls gathered around the plasma start to roar, again. For a while, we drink in silence as we wait for Carmichael.

He comes back not another two minutes later.

I'm ready, he says to us, clasping his hands together.

Lini and I look up at him dumbly, like seasoned bar flies.

We watch him take another deep sip from his beer.

Fear takes over my chest again.

**We leave the counter** just as the game hits half time. The diski louts rush back to the bar, griping and cheering over glasses of cheap brandy. Who knows? It gets really hard to pick them apart, these guys, the winners from the losers, but in any case, the three of us take our beers with us and walk up the staircase next to the men's, where we find Vincent, the resident bouncer with the mean mug. To look at Vincent standing guard by this door, imagine for yourself five slabs of braaied beef wrapped up in a beanie and a black dress shirt, think of a pair of black jeans and black desert boots. Then imagine a physical incapability of expressing more than a single emotion with your facial features, a deep disapproval emanating a dull glow through a pair of narrow, jaundiced eyes. In other words, the guy isn't the best thing you'll ever see. In any case, I slow my friends down and tell Vincent that it's us. I tell him that it's us and we're here for something. He stands there for a while and then naturally, he asks me who we are.

So I tell him.

I tell him we're here to meet up with this guy inside.

To Vincent, what I'm saying is, we're here for the guy, and then I'm pointing at that door, again. In response, he just stands there, eyeballing us for close to a minute and a half. Then he tries what he can for a smile, which I have to say is a real effort for the meat on this guy's face. So that's how it is. He's still staring down at Carmichael, Lini and I, at the three of us as we walk up towards him. Then, before we reach the door, he says he wants to know what we have to talk about with a man who looks like the one he has behind him. Those are the words he uses on us.



To watch Vincent, by the way, he's moving himself sluggishly out of the way as he asks us this. I guess it's meant to be a bouncer manoeuvre or something, a gesture meant to demonstrate how he needs an answer before letting us through, lower level intimidation.

Well, whatever, I think.

I'll concede to it.

So I tell Vincent what we're here for is hospital work. I tell him the reason we're here, standing in front of him, it's because we're working the field as volunteers. I say to him that the three of us, we've all got jobs in some ward or other at Groote Schuur Hospital. Then I tell him how this is what we have to talk about with the guy waiting inside.

So he nods his head

Still staring at us, he raises a beefy paw to his face and draws out a slow, tight circle in front of his yellow eyes. When he starts talking, again, he tells us to explain why the man has the kind of face he has. This is Vincent, the resident bouncer here at Vic's, and he's telling us he's never seen anything like it. What he's telling us is how we should let him know what happened to this man's face. To the three of us standing here on the staircase, Vincent, he tells us we should do that for him or there's no entry for us. This is when Carmichael decides to speak up.

He tells this guy look, we can't answer that, and in response, Vincent sizes him up a third time.

The guy's eyes glide over the quarts in our hands and he tells us, what kind of hospital meeting do you have where it's just three children like you holding up beer bottles, anyway?

I mean, really.

I can't think of anything else to say to this guy, so I look at my friends and they seem to draw blanks, too. Then the door cracks

open behind him. The woman who tends the upstairs bar approaches Vincent from behind and lays a thin hand on one of his cannonball shoulders. Her voice flows out of her like a sigh.

The man says to let them in, she whispers.

The bartender doesn't bother to look down at us.

So she tells Vincent he can collect his tip at the bottom till. Then her hand drops down and she disappears back into the bar. Outside, Vincent considers us for a moment longer.

Then slowly, he starts to nod.

He says, okay, okay, you've convinced me.

Feigning reluctance, and visibly pleased by the mention of his tip, he opens the door to the second bar and waves us in like an English butler. So we walk passed him and step over the threshold one after the other, Carmichael, Lini and I, and then we just stand there, by the door, holding up our beers and waiting for our eyes to adjust to this much dimmer floor. The three of us don't move forward, and this is when I realize how I've stopped breathing.

This is when we hear his voice, too.

This is when we hear the voice of the guy who's called us, here. Please lock the door after you, he says from somewhere on the darkened floor. You'll soon learn how much I'm devoted to my people, but I'm afraid I'm not very much fond of their intrusions.

It's really strange, but when I hear this guy's voice, I feel no choice, but to do as he says. What I tell myself, however, as I'm turning around to balance myself on the door, is that instead of being this guy's lackey, what I'm doing is simply pushing things forward for the three of us, forward for me and my two friends, Carmichael and Lini. That's all I'm doing. So I take this shallow, faltering breath.

Then I lock the door and trace the guy's voice to a corner in the far left, where there's a silhouette of a man leaning back on one

of the leather couches in the bar, one leg bent at the knee over the other, a long brimmed hat balanced on the short table, and smoke curling against the light from the windows overlooking St. Peter's Road. So here I am standing by the door with my two friends. I haven't moved a step forward since locking it, and each of us, Carmichael, Lini and myself, we're still holding on to our quarts of beer. Then, as we step forward, time seems to fold on me.

My vertigo, the kind I always get before one of my fainting spells, arrives without warning. The windows across the street seem to grow larger and my head fills up with the memory of once having lived behind them, there in the opposite building, above the bottle store on St. Peter's off main, and at the time I was enrolled for my science diploma at the Technikon in town. My tuition had been paid for by an energy company that required I be stationed in a secluded part of the country, some dustbowl under development in the North West province, and I'd failed to honour the stipulation after my graduation. I'd googled the place and discovered a genuine shit hole for myself up there in the North West. So I'd owed them back payments in student fees, and I'd paid them back with my work as a lab assistant, staving off skipped meals by taking my first huffs of Industrial, and sending off money by the month until the day I fell sick at my job. Then they'd pardoned me, after learning of my accident, and I'd moved out of Mowbray and into Obs. I no longer had as much debt.

I'm over here, the man says to us.

He waves a hand.

My head clears as my nausea thins out. I look through the room and find his head, again, this long narrow face in silhouette against the large road lit panes.

Please come take a seat with me, he says.

I can see him moving his arm.

He motions with his hand and we move forward, the three of us, Carmichael, Lini and me, as if testing the ground, taking our time as we walk towards him. The woman behind the bar stares at us with a pair of glazed over eyes, passively pressing the buttons on her cell phone, it's blue glow playing on her neck and face, revealing a sharp jaw moving itself lazily around a wad of gum. She looks down as we walk passed her, and I imagine hearing her tongue click, but when I look back, I see her head leaning down the same way I left it, her eyes absorbed in the pixels spinning across her screen.

You can't possibly still imagine I'm the law, the man laughs as the three of us draw closer to him.

This is how this guy talks to us, by the way.

He booms in this register picked out from about two centuries of asshole ago, and has a tone like he sounds tired and tickled at the same time. The way he's assured, it's the way you imagine an audio book artist recording his favourite passage from Shakespeare, or the way you imagine some crestfallen stage director on one of those Hallmark daytime shows, you know the ones, where there's some ruined theatre genius with his last chance at redemption, a guy set on fixing a troubled, but promising class of high school jocks. Then his ex-wife calls in the second act, and he has a relapse in his favourite bar. That sort of thing.

It feels like one of those performances, in any case, but the three of us draw in closer to him, anyway, and once we've properly located where he is, we quicken our pace. Then finally, we reach the corner where he's seated himself down, and once there, Carmichael, Lini and I take our seats on the other side of the short coffee table and wait.

So here we are.

Here's the ugly man, and looking at him, the guy has his head down and even this close up his face appears to be covered in shadows. You get the feeling you won't find a whole lot to describe about his face, and even his head, closely shaven and dimly reflective of the street glow, looks like any other shape on any other guy's shoulders. It's almost as if in calling himself ugly, he somehow erased his features, drawing attention to something that isn't there. There's no lasting description above the V of his crisp white shirt. I lean back, feeling confused by the idea, as none of us have seen his face, and that's when I realize what's unsettling me about him. He's wearing a mask.

Please allow me a moment, he tells us.

So we do that.

We watch him as his fingers prod, fussing over this black tablet device on the coffee table. It's about the size of an envelope and he's set it flat on its thin back. Looking at it, it's probably what he used to send us his emails, what he used to send us the scanned ID bios he intimidated us with. The tablet device has a dim screen light that illuminates him only up to his wrists and cufflinks, and more than once, he cracks the knuckles on his right hand as if in frustration at its speed or, I think to myself, sitting here with my two friends, the three of us watching him from across the short table with our quarts between our legs, to ground a stray a current. The way he looks is that that he's wearing this three piece suit, each part a deep red that matches his feathered hat. I couldn't tell you if he was capable of holding electricity.

I should tell you, by the way, he says again.

He still doesn't look up at Carmichael, Lini and I, and we watch him as his long forefinger swipes a grey folder across the screen. He clears his throat and goes on.

He says, I should tell you I'm rather pleased you were able to find your way to me. I was beginning to wonder if I might've been the cause of perhaps too much trouble. Given the day, I understand I called for us to meet at short notice and for that, I should extend an apology and believe me, I do so. However, as you'll soon learn for yourselves, the matter which brings us together bears its own sensitivities in regards to the dictates of time, and for that reason alone, I'm rather confident that our arrangement, here, as hasty as it might very well seem to you, my newest friends, is perhaps the one that would serve our purposes best.

So the ugly man, this is what he tells the three of us.

This is what he tells Carmichael, Lini and I, and we just sit there for a long moment and don't say anything in response.

I mean, what do you say to a guy like this?

Dr Livingstone, I presume?

**In this man's presence**, my uncle Vuyo begins to recede. He sinks back into the ten years I left between us before the message and I feel gratitude.

**Thirty or so seconds pass** over us in silence before the ugly man pushes his tablet aside. Clicking off the gold latching on his silver cigarette case, he pauses for a moment to look down at the container, and then he weaves his head and trains his eyes through

the dimness, raising his right hand to send out a signal to the bartender. My dear, he says to her, in that Victorian voice of his, might we have the lights back on?

So I hear the bartender shuffle her cell phone away.

From where I'm sitting, I look back and watch her silhouette as she saunters around her counter, and back towards the entrance wall. There, close to the door I looked on the three of us stepping inside this place, she turns a knob and a mist of yellow light settles itself softly between us and the ugly man.

Finally, I think to myself, here's this guy showing himself.

He clears his throat and starts talking.

You'd be shocked, he announces, sounding surprisingly cheerful, how little science has accomplished for the facial prosthetic. The field's first, and by my humble estimate, truest, visionary, was a man born in the year 1510, a Frenchman by the name of Ambrose Paré, who used to shear the hair off kings to earn his keep in the court. He had, as regular clients, Henry I, Charles IX and Henry III. Francis II is also said to have sat under his blade during his short kingship. In his work as a surgeon, however, he was a man at home in the battlefield. He made limbs for soldiers who'd been maimed during the wars.

Here, he pauses in his speech, but still doesn't look up at us.

What he does instead is tap the filter on his cigarette over the gleaming case, his long fingers pushing the air out of the stick and packing up the leaves. He says, I see you've already helped yourselves to something to drink. It's no bother, but should you want more, I beg you only to mention so. I believe Nolwazi, here, might be the most accomplished bar maiden on this side of the mountain. He turns his head towards her and then back at us. Now, he says, where was I? Oh, yes, we were discussing Ambrose Paré, weren't we?

Right.

So I guess this is how this goes on, then.

It turns out it's from the First World War, this mask he has on.

That's what he tells Carmichael, Lini and I about it, anyway.

He goes, well, the technique itself is from the Great War. I'm afraid this hunk of tin isn't quite as old as all that. You'll have to forgive me my indulgence. I tend to have a desire to get the face and mask out of the way as soon as I can. It's the only way I can guarantee myself anyone's attention. My face is somewhat of an attraction, I understand, and by all means I myself am no stranger to its oddness. However, I invited you here for matters unrelated to my countenance. Now, friends, if you don't mind, may I?

He raises his hands to the sides of his face and holds them up there, against his ears. In response to his question, Carmichael, Lini and I just sit there, staring at him in silence.

I guess our beers should be half-way flat, by now. Here, between our knees, I guess they should've turned to water.

To look at him, by the way, the ugly man's mask is painted the sandy colour of his hands and neck, with two round holes for eyes and two piercings serving him for breathing holes. Then, just above the chin, it's carved into three narrow slits for him to talk through.

So there's a reason you didn't get plastic surgery?

This comes from Linireaux.

From Carmichael's right hand side, she breaks through our silence, and when she does this, I reach down for my beer. The sip I take from the bottle tastes warm, causing my mouth to fill up with saliva. The bitterness clings to the sides of my tongue, trickling down my throat and knotting my stomach. Then the ugly man, as if noticing my discomfort, drops his hands and shakes his head.



He goes, Monsieur Paré. The first men he patched up from the wars broke his big heart. He gave them back their arms and legs and they took their own lives. They didn't favour their looks. I've never understood those men. A man is given his scars out in his world as a consequence of his spirit and his battles. He does not pay a fee to have them brandished astride a surgeon's table.

The ugly man goes silent.

Then, after a brief pause, he says, now, I do trust I have your permission? His hands pull at the sides of his mask and he lifts it off his face. He leans back on the couch with his arms apart and one leg over the other, while his hands hold onto the arm rests with his face fully in view. If he's smiling, then none of us can tell it. If he's smiling, then I can't tell you where the smile starts or it ends. If he's smiling, then half the inside of this guy's face is gleaming in full view.

**Next, the bartender walks over** to us holding up a brandy snifter on a clothed tray. The ugly man nods at her and she disappears back into the bar. He smokes his cigarette through a long white tube fitted into his throat, and the way he looks as he does this, it's that half the right side of his face is shining and missing away from him.

I guess this is when I start talking.

I say, you paid us a lot of money.

Then I ask him, what for?

He breathes out smoke slowly through his nostrils.

I'm under the impression I was clear on my intention, he says. I want to make a purchase.

We don't have any pills on us, I tell him.

So he nods.

I watch the smoke hold around his face like a meadow fog.

I figured as much, he says, unfazed. After all, it was very short notice, as I've said. He takes another puff and lets it out.

I ask him, why did you bring us, here?

Why, he says, you provide a social service, do you not?

It's a scam, I tell this guy.

He laughs.

He does that for a while, too, and you can only tell he's laughing from the sound he makes and the movement of his shoulders. The rest of him isn't that easy to keep focus. For the parts of his face that don't move, he looks like a fresh wound, still closing up under and a splash of boiling oil.

I mean, this is really medieval stuff.

Eventually, he stops.

He tells me, now, now, we both know that isn't true

He lifts his leg over the other and straightens himself up on the couch. He slips his cigarette case inside his jacket and reaches for his long brimmed hat. Then he packs his tablet device away and buttons his cufflinks. I've kept you for far too long, he tells us. Let me know when you have the package.

He adjusts his hat on his head, the mask already strapped on his face. Then, just like that, he nods and walks away from the three of us. He tips his hat at Nolwazi, the bartender, and walks out of the door, down the staircase, into Mowbray.

Then that's it.

It's done.

We're left alone in the yellow light and the remaining ribbons of his cigarette smoke. This is Carmichael, Lini and I, and almost at

the same time, with the three of us sitting still with our beer gone to warm water between our knees, the three of us whisper, what?

**Then it's later and I get a delayed text** from my case manager, Sis' Thobeka. The way this happens, it comes in at about an hour and a half later, when the three of us are back here at Lini's place, settled inside West Ridge Heights, again. Carmichael, who's high on qhat, plays an erratic set of drums on his kneecaps, and then he tells us we should just use all the guy's money and then kill ourselves. Lini and I agree to give it to him. We share a stem between us and tell Carmichael this isn't a bad idea.

We say to him this isn't a bad idea at all.

It's like that book, he says back to us.

He goes, some guy wrote a book and won a prize for it.

I open the text message and Sis' Thobeka says to me, your CD4 count. Sis' Thobeka, she says to me, Lindanathi, you didn't fax us your CD4 sheet like I said. I thought I told you yesterday.

So I delete her message.

Then Carmichael goes, I can't remember the guy who wrote that book. He tells us, I'm googling it.

So Lini and I lean over him.

For the rest of the night, we keep stems between our teeth and chew them until we can't feel our faces, anymore.

**The following morning** finds the three of us still awake. The sun rolls over Table Mountain just after 6 am on Monday morning, and under it, we lie sprawled across Lini's leather sectional couch, listening to her drawl as she makes us guess the significance of the day today. Five minutes later, she tells us it's National Women's Day. Lini says, I don't have to go in for work, today, and my aunt is still dead. Then she falls back on the sectional couch and just lies there, motionless, and about half an hour later, we take our showers and afterwards, the three of us share what's left of the qhat before we take the lift down to the ground floor. We catch a taxi to the bottle store in Claremont, and there, we stock up on champagne and liqueurs and everything else we never drink. Then we walk out of the bottle store with a loaded shopping bag in each hand, skipping across the main road like we're all dying tomorrow. Then this goes on for the rest of Monday. We talk and sometimes the three of us shout. Then our vision grows sharp around 4 am, and we feel ourselves floating up to the ceiling, giving many praises to existence.

**Masks, Carmichael announces to me and Lini.** Just because some people wear a mask, that doesn't mean they have to have done something wrong. I guess what Carmichael's doing is badly paraphrasing Danger Doom, this band he lists as a favourite on one of his many Mixcloud pages. He's sitting opposite the two of us, me and Lini, on the other side of Lini's coffee table, and he's printing out three paper masks for us to use.

So here we are.

The three of us.

It's the new Danger Doom, myself and Linireaux.

It's been about 48 hours since we took the ugly man's money. Now we're back here at Lini's place, over at West Ridge Heights, and as the sun continues to slide itself across Lini's living room windows, throwing its rays across the bricks and bonnets stacked up tight against each other in Cape Town, and with the ghosts of Newlands still holding vigil in their still and quiet gardens, and according to Lini, only now beginning to consider this cream-coloured building for our wealth, we pass around her kitchen scissors and knit together links of rubber bands, and then we pull paper sheets over our faces, turning ourselves into persons more powerful. So this is what we're doing instead of discussing the ugly man. Carmichael, Lini and I, this is what we're doing instead of discussing Aunt Sylvia, Lini's aunt, whose body gets flown out to Johannesburg in a box, today.

Lini opens the biggest window she has in the living room.

She blows out air and says, it's hot all over Cape Town, today. The two of us agree.

She isn't lying about this.

You can feel the heat bouncing off the walls and sinking deep into her leather sectional couch, and the way Carmichael, Lini and I have arranged ourselves here inside her flat, the three of us together, when we get up and walk around the apartment, it's in everything off but our underwear. The way we drink, also, is that we take everything out of the freezer and replace it with another bottle of something full. We've left multi-coloured spills on Lini's now uncared for kitchen floor, and in the living room, Carmichael passes me another bottle of champagne and I take a swig from it before he stands up to tell us who he is, today.

This is how it sometimes starts around here.

We have these games we waste our lives on, like everyone else. Carmichael's up first, and today, he tells us we should call him the country of Zimbabwe. The way he's standing in front of me and Lini, both of us sitting here on the leather sectional before him, he has Robert Mugabe's scowl pressed against his gaunt face. The grey printout hangs in contrast to his wide and thin shoulders, and pulling back on the sides of his face, it looks like the beginning of a grimace or laughter. Carmichael tells us he has 16 million people inside of him. He tells us that lying down, he's about four hundred thousand square kilometres wide, and the way his pockets are set up, only seventy percent of his people get to live under the breadline. Then Lini hands me the bottle of champagne and gets up from the couch in a white bra and boy shorts. She fixes Ellen Johnson Sirleaf with a link of rubber bands around her face, and tells us she's only about a hundred thousand square kilometres in length and width. Linireaux, she says she only has 4 million people living inside of her, and the way her pockets are set up, only eighty percent of them live under her breadline. Then, when she's done, Lini drops herself next to me on the sectional couch, and as she lands on the cushion, barely depressing it with her weight, I hand her the bottle of champagne. This is when I get up in front of them for my turn. I'm in my boxers with a picture of Joseph Kabila on my face, and what I tell my friends is that all around, I'm about 2 million square kilometres in length and width. I've got 76 million people living inside of me, and the way my pockets are set up, it's only ninety percent of them that live under my breadline. Then, when I'm done speaking, Lini reaches over and I take the champagne from her before I sit back down.

Let's have an underwear party, Carmichael says a moment later. He takes a long sip from the champagne and nurses it between his knees. Then he lights a cigarette.

We have more money than any of the citizens in those countries, Lini says. Maybe even their presidents.

Carmichael takes a drag and shakes his head.

I don't know about the presidents, he says.

Definitely not the presidents, I don't think, I add.

Then I get up for the kitchen and walk back.

We pass around another fresh bottle of champagne.

Then Lini says, that's true, but like, you know when people say the people, right? I always think presidents are what they mean by the people. Sitting on the other side of Lini, Carmichael asks her to explain. So I hand her the bottle and she goes, well, just think about this for a second, Car. She says, you remember about South Africa's first three decades, right? For like thirty years or something South Africa was basically this one man. People used to call him uTata we Sizwe.

I tell her sure. I say to Lini I remember.

So she goes on.

She says, that's around the same time we were born, right?

Carmichael and I nod.

So Lini says, I mean, that's also the case for a lot of other people, isn't it? So we all shared a father in that sense.

Then Carmichael says, what do you mean shared?

Now Lini laughs.

She goes, okay.

Lini says, look, I mean, sure, it's easy to dismiss the whole thing as some bullshit nationalism thing, I get it, but that isn't my

point, is it? I think my point is more like, on a physical and cultural basis we were all him, we were all this one man from the island.

Then Lini asks if we understand her.

I tell her that I think I do.

Or sometimes, I think I do, in any case.

Like most things with Lini, this isn't her first time on the topic.

Eventually, she'd asked me to tell them a space story yesterday, and I'd thought about something I didn't feel like telling my two friends. It hadn't been a space story and I'd tried to be distracted from it by my view of the beach, but with each attempt, I'd failed at getting away. The thought itself had persisted, and I can see myself there, again, now, and this is how it all takes place inside my head. I fall back on the sectional couch and watch as the ocean water laps the crystal quartz off the sand, again, the water rushing in from every angle inside Lini's living room. Carmichael leans over his computer and his body divides into three, and I think about what I thought about at the beach, about how the points at the coasts where the ships first landed en route to Asia from Europe, as well as the province of Gauteng, where the gold dregs cooled under pools, were still the only places that were developed on the tip of the continent. During work, I'd read somewhere that the first Portuguese settlers had decided to steer clear of the Cape Peninsula, citing rough seas, and around the early 1500's, one of their ships had been sunk by a handful of bare-chested Xhosas in Table Bay. However, this merely meant that they went further up to Mozambique, and then onto Mombasa, only to be replaced by the English and the Dutch. This is how similar to a virus humanity had conducted itself in this corner of the world, and how clinging and precarious the life it offered, now, and how bumbling and flailing its movement was through the curves of history. Everything had been a mistake, a wrongdoing, and a



shame, and our lives would not only endure and end under this, but they would be caused and insignificant when they finally did. They were blips in the schemes of the rotund and red-faced men who'd set out a table to divide our landmass in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men of manners, who'd been driven by a humorous, if continentally refined, greed. In the meantime, nothing would be spared of us. For our concerns and worries, we would labour for pittances, disappoint our forebears and disabuse them of their small legacies, and as the future drew closer, we would illustrate the exact nature of their inconsequence, and in our bitterness, almost as a final stroke, we would turn around and hurt those we communed with, the only ones left available for us to do so with impunity. So this is what I'm thinking as I turn to face towards Linireaux, whose head begins to grow bright like a lamp. We have never overtly harmed each other before. The light intensifies inside the living room and I watch her for a long time as she nods. Then I get up to get more champagne for the three of us, and when I return, Lini says to me that the three of us should get one big house. Sitting on the sectional couch, her head now glowing like ten fists of sunlight, she says to me let's grow to be more than 2 million square kilometres in size. I clench my eyelids.

**I remember how last year**, it must've been toward the end of April, at a bottle store near Fish Hoek, that Lini had gone between the aisles in search of a flavoured vodka bottle for us to split, when the teller, a large, affable Muslim man, had asked me why my friends were only souties, and right now, I think of Bhut' Vuyo. Lini, who

often likened herself to the 20's writer, Nella Larsen, had what she called a categorically black father and a categorically white mother, her word being categorically, but wasn't dark enough to register as what the man might've recognized as coloured or Malay in the area. Even so, genetics weren't the kind of explanation he was after, I could tell, and in any case, here was Carmichael, who was a bastion of Scandinavian features, and so the question had provoked in me another line of thinking. I suppose my earliest memories of friendship were with boys who looked every bit as brown as me, I could remember that much, and at a time when I hadn't fully assimilated into the middle class, a status that would then loom over the rest of my childhood. I was never close to my parents as a child. My father and mother had spent a few years building a home inside a small church community in a booming corner of the Eastern Cape, and I had been brought into it after spending my formative years at my maternal grandmother's rural home. I felt uncomfortable, during my early years with them, and I guess as ashamed as it was possible for a boy my age, in conflict with his own home, to feel. Then, after being enrolled at a nearby primary school, I was introduced to the community church, at which point I began to withdraw even further, and even as a prepubescent, began to feel the weighted proximity of my own death, a closing in on the endless luminosity I'd once felt about being alive, each caning a retrieval of a wonder I'd known closely from the world, a silencing of my own audacity for it. So it was only years later, in the living room, with visiting cousins and during a year of mostly private, but accumulating social failures, that I quietly reflected on my cousins with their crushes and sex talks, and realized that, despite everything marked us as alike, and perhaps even by accident, we had been exiled into different interstices of the same universe. Then, years later, in a different town and with my parents

older, wealthier and apart, Michelle's brother, a boy from school rumoured to have slept with his dog, would call me an ape when I refused to show him my penis in a car that sat junked in their yard, instilling in me a deep mistrust for the secrecy of families with his skin tone, while on the other hand, a few years later still, I would be on a flight to Johannesburg when, around 39 000 feet above sea-level I would realize that summer films featuring only middle-class African-Americans, with narratives that centred around romantic relationships and resolved themselves over tragedy or farce, reminded me of my stasis in the environments of my upbringing, my own miscomprehension of their social mores, what I hadn't adapted into from my life at my grandmother's village, and, as the presence of the church announced itself, of my mortality. I looked through the window as we flew over the country, that night. I couldn't see the ocean, and from a young age, I imagined, I had felt just as incommunicable to the vast and apparent. Growing up, I'd felt close to grief, each social shortcoming a reminder of a time I could no longer return to, but incapable of displaying it, and even years later, when my grandmother was finally taken under by diabetes, I'd reacted by sinking myself deeper into advanced mathematics, video games and animation. These had come later, when I became drawn to the newness, and seemingly lawless realm of the world depicted in images and pixels, reminiscent of a time when an uncle from the village would squeeze my head between his palms and lift me up to get a view of the ocean over the hills, which I never saw, but succeeded in instilling in me the idea that the natural world was one without perimeters. They also reminded me of when, after a day of stoning crabs and using the clay on the river bank to mold sculptures of my grandmother's cattle, my aunt had cautioned us against killing living creatures for sport, warning that at night we would be visited by

the forebears of these crabs, who would knock on the door with bodies as tall as men in the village. In the days I spent in front of the glimmer of the television and the computer screen, I began to think that maybe friends were slightly larger than average sized collectable items, a staple principle in video games, each endowed with a personality and a power, won over from the challenge of social interaction, and in most cases, capable of returning the same warmth you afforded them. It didn't seem farfetched to me to imagine that people were attracted to each other's realities, aesthetic configuration, ability to affirm, and, in the cases of romantic relationships, devotion. In the years that followed, parts of me had blossomed and flourished within media forms that were now obsolete, the technology of cartridges, for example, was a catalogue of my childhood wonder, and had been discontinued, estranging me as much from what I knew about myself as I'd felt when removed from my grandmother's stories and home. Taken with them into obscurity were portions of my childhood and who I was, evidence of the impositions and scratches I'd left or discovered in the world, and now put to the side like outdated hardware. So it went. Maybe having at one point been incommunicable, I had begun without culture, in the contemporary sense of culture being defined, principally, as a compatible system of engagement with a given environment, and was now receding back into that fatal absence. First, I had simply been, a grandson and a friend, and then I had become the designation of my race. Now I was in recession from culture, visible only as the colour in situations where I needed to make money for sustenance, and to the eyes of people whose thoughts, such as this Muslim man's, such as my cousins', and Michelle's brother, I could no longer follow without the involvement of money or aversion. Maybe my friends and I had become addicts. I had read somewhere

that junkies suffered two deaths, the first of which was borne from society, and the second was the dissipation of their flesh, but addicted to what? Industrial had no addictive properties, although it had an adverse effect on the brain's facility for memory. So instead, was it possible then, that memory loss, losing the trajectory of one's childhood, could coincide with the body's own seven-year regeneration cycle, its recurring cellular death? This would mean parts of a life could become new and first hand with the passage of time and paradoxically, the encroaching of old age, of death. Since I used Industrial, and my mentation had depended on now obsolete technologies, I had been affected by regeneration at both a physical and mental level, and it seemed likely that, more than being this designation, black, I was once again new, from having been new and having died, and was now dying, once again. I guess that's what my friends and I were. Possibly, in any case. I looked down at the counter, that day. Lini came around with the bottle and the two of us paid the guy. It was raspberry and I hadn't answered him. Instead, I'd watched him shaking his head as we walked out. It didn't matter anyway, I thought at the time, but now I could tell that every word had.

**We never hear** from the ugly man, again. There isn't much else to say about him. He's just one of this city's many ciphers, the strange things that happen in the metropolis, which take up obscure back page news items. Carmichael speculated that he was a deposed president, and Lini says the advisor to the one. In any case, the

money was retracted from our account, laundered most likely, and he never came back for the ARV's.

**In the morning**, around 7 am, I email François Viljoen, my landlord, and tell him how I want out of my twelve month lease. I've come to accept it that has to be done. François says this is fine, that it won't cause us much of a hassle to do. He says he'll start showing the place off to people, right away, and so I type back, great, and leave West Ridge Heights with Carmichael and Lini still asleep. Down at the parking lot gate, I wait for a car taking someone to work or school before I trail after its brake lights. Then I take a taxi to Obs on main road, get off on Anzio, and walk down passed Lower Main. I use a round black tag to get inside my building and walk up two flights of stairs before I let myself into my room. The place feels like a storage room, dead still and airless. I open a window and drop myself on the bed. Here I am, I think to myself, a human inside its habitat.

I try to doze off and fail.

I think of when I started viewing humans as units.

My phone is lying in my hand.

It's open on the text messenger.

In my first year of university, with LT gone just about a year, I'd come across the works of Camus and Sartre in a book about philosophers who said human life meant nothing. I was impressed by Sartre's reported confidence and allure, despite the handicap of his ugliness, and of Camus' chain-smoking chic and African background. In the end, I felt vindicated by what I drew from the philosophies of these men, as well as their shortcomings, and saw something of

myself in how they'd reduced the existence around them into material terms, disposing of any meaningful narrative to the life and culture human families carried. This way, I guess I felt justified in the distance I'd created from my own home before and after I'd lead to my little brother's death. It was sensible to think of culture as a fabrication, and to consider initiation under the same light, and that the only noble dream was one of radical reinvention, of a new paradigm, and of destroying everything humans had made with their hands and start anew. Those were the words I threw around with friends. It was supposedly the preoccupation of all pure and sophisticated minds. This carried me through my first year and dropout. I even dreamt it. I filled rugby fields with humanity's blood.

Now I couldn't tell if I'd believed any of it.

Had I been driven by altruism, or just evasion as Lini had said? My stomach grumbles, loud inside my flat, and I can't recall the last time I ate. I turn over and start to feel sick.

There's another hospital strike, the taxi driver said.

On my way here, we were packed about eighteen under a fog of perfume, and he described a mother in law whose lungs had collapsed inside a Golden Arrow bus in Milnerton. Even as Lini's aunt's life had ended there were still others that would clamber after it. The taxi driver told us a story about Baragwanath, after that, which is where Sis' Thobeka had once done her nursing, and he said how an outstanding bill had lead to authorities plunging the hospital inside a black out, choking to death more than two dozen babies in the maternity ward.

We were all called, eventually, and some of us were hauled.

There was little one could do.

I thought of Nelson Mandela and the new society he'd proposed for us, instead, where all our dying had been routinely

taking place, and how, on some parts of the country, the Earth had been gutted open with so many graves, a view from the sky parted the clouds to reveal the pits of a hornet's nest. It was true that Rholihlahla had grown to be fond of his captors in his later years, and encouraged us to do the same in the land he was revising together with them. In this way, the project of the first democratically elected president, and the projects of his successors, their autobiographies, like Lini had said to us, had ended in the country's failure. They proposed a reconciliatory adoration for one's former captors but the conditions for the captors' supremacy remained intact. One became a proponent of it, as a result, while the captors looked on sheepishly, meek faced as they doled out their embarrassment, and in the end, wilfully helpless against their complicity. My friends and I had become rainbow nation slogans as result, and were perhaps equally guilty of chicanery. We had never been agents of change, or the members of a new society, but merely a gesture, and the performance of an incomplete reconciliation. We made money together for the most part. Maybe this is what Julian wanted to show us with his art. In his ridiculousness, he could show us who we truly were. Primarily, we were connected to each other as consumers, what we bought and the labour we sold for it. That was all we'd managed to do here in Cape Town. It was through our patterns of consumption that we could find who we were, as functioning units within a mutual society, and once we had those strata aligned, we could discover the holes in one another. Now I wondered if the blank slate I proposed, the destruction of society I hankered for, all the blood on the rugby fields I dreamt of, was just another way to forgive and be justified in coveting proximity with my captors. Maybe I wanted to be smothered by them. My friends had skins described as white, but they seemed more like me than they did Mandela's jailors.



Still, I could see that even if this was a fact, despite the innocence I presumed for my friends, Carmichael and Lini, I couldn't guarantee that I myself was any different from Rholihlahla, who learnt to adore those who oppressed him. They were given stronger ropes to work with than I, my two friends, and that was an omission I'd made for the three of us in our entire time together.

It was that simple, I suppose.

This was how Bhut' Vuyo's will would win me over.

In bed, I turn my body over again.

I remember Carmichael once telling us that he'd made an evaluation of our personalities, and that he'd pitted them over a hundred year time scale and concluded that in the future, it would become easier for us to see people's defects, fears, deceptions, and personal compensations as early as their first approach towards us. What Carmichael described back then was a kind of experience based radar, or otherwise a time based ocular plug-in that made one's nuances float feverishly to the surface of their person, bouncing off their shoulders like pop-up ads on a free pornography site, or otherwise sliding out of their sleeves like winning decks in Solitaire for Windows '95.

It went something like that.

I felt myself agreeing with him.

We were huffing paint thinner at his place in Seapoint.

To explain himself further, Carmichael said that after leaving school, he had become less capable of projecting an enduringly optimistic image over a human being that he formed a casual to strong acquaintance with, an image that could be sustained for as little as three minutes or even upwards of four years, before, no longer buoyed by the point A to point B progression that came with undertaking an enthused study of the nature of someone else, or by

the diffuse and placid ease that surrounded two people of focused and mutually directed devotion, would collapse in on itself, leaving both the projector and the projected momentarily stranded, both of them with their palms up and more than a slight amount of embarrassment, each a little less willing to offer themselves to the world of other people.

I guess Carmichael had found a similarity in me and Lini.

None of us could deny that.

To his credit, by the time the three of us had come around to actually meeting one another, we'd all felt profoundly alienated by the protocols required in relating to people in the usual sense. Things had happened, I guess, in the way that things always followed after the other and happened, at least in what at most times appeared to be the linear movement of matter through space and time, and there was never a question of any of us getting involved with one another. We all seemed to have agreed on it, too, with a quiet, complicit and inattentive relief, that we were somehow wrecked, and that we had met within obviously wrecked circumstances. I guess you could see a funny side to things, as well, in that our failures as people could be in clear view of each other, and sometimes we focused them strongest in how we disparaged those who suffered around us in the meetings, but Carmichael, Lini and I, the three of us together as a trio of new friends, we'd never owned up to the things we'd had to do in order to keep seeing each other on those first few weeks, admitted to what it was, where it was, and who it was, that we were detaching ourselves from. This secrecy wasn't incidental, but meant to maintain something unknowable in each of us, a corner we could keep divested of our good will without any breach in conscience at the times we found it necessary to hurt one another. Though, we hardly ever did. There were those who had watched the same TV shows as

us and those who hadn't. This was our guide. It was how we had distinguished ourselves in the counselling sessions, and how, with our clothes and our references, we had found each other. Part of the appeal of television, Carmichael once said, was the limited choice. You felt absolved as the communication, no doubt a source of pollution, was directed by an unmanageable and unidirectional power. You had only to engage and resist and it true an outline of who you were would cut itself out in the negative space.

Still, I wondered if we'd met and made a life under too little.

I found that possible, too.

The time turns itself to 9 am.

My goal, I knew, hadn't been to become an American by immersing myself into its culture, but to reject the identity of having been born a happy accident. I felt a need to bypass the goofiness that had taken the role of our nationalism. I felt it referencing too well the same brutality it was meant to veil. To a degree, everyone born in our country had been unplanned because of this same brutality. Lacking liberty, the place had been experimental from inception as a working state, and quite unsuitable for human life, having been interrupted at the process when its humans were only starting to harness its nature. To begin with, I'd been drawn by the fact that my church community had been too inhibitive, no drunks or other moral failures were in display for us, and so I'd gone to the media to void my loneliness and want of kin, my depression, I suppose, and possibly my eventual insanity from being incommunicable to others. In the beginning, I had believed that the world in the media was more reflective of who I was, with its space for the misfits in my community, and I'd gone on to study it at the university in Rondebosch, but now I realized that this was only a fancy, as the media could only be the media, and in people, it merely created an extension of its own

performance for capital. Even though the America of the late 1980's and 1990's had absorbed well into South Africa, it was still only media for us. Now, having gone into adulthood, and from the internet splintering the centralized power of the United States, we had begun to take the media off and stir the stick in something murkier in what we were. Some of us wanted to erect our own idols in its stead, but it made no sense to do so, since pieces seemed the natural state for global culture, the software each of us had downloaded in order to navigate how the world had emerged after the Industrial Revolution. Language, and its precedent, mentation, were always meant to form a discordant matrix between the consciousness and its environment, between the consciousness and the beginnings of other people, and we were losing ours, which meant that Steve Biko had been too optimistic and had been stopped short in more than one way in that van in '77. The face Africa had to show was still human, and not yet a cyborg, but it was far from the gift he'd written it to be. Here, at the world's central apex, or on its nadir, depending on your compass, we were drawing back again into the source, the beginning of the bewilderment that began the Renaissance around the Mediterranean, and our duty was to reevaluate humankind or perish. Our forebears had left us nothing that would persist in the future the world required, meaning we had never won against nature. We were an animated character elevated a few paces off a cliff, buoyed by a wearing tenacity and an imagined platform. Global culture had begun to undermine capitalism more and more, and technology was beginning to scramble the known systems. Capitalism, grown vast, had begun to sarcastically implode, experimentally at first, in 1920, and then almost as a force of nature in 2008, close to a hundred years later, when it bewildered its devotees and separated millions from a means of livelihood on the planet. Since the beginning of the

second millennium, technology, perhaps the most primal and intuitive of humanity's various projects, and the one closest to its desire and anxiety, had undermined humanity's current iteration of society. This is where my perspective on the need to destroy society had matured. Here in the apex, in South Africa, my friends and I, along with the debilitating effects of Industrial on our memory and mentation, had begun to recede from culture. It was likely that the apex was preparing itself for a paradigm shift or an implosion. The holes in its cultural architecture had started showing early for the structure had long been flimsy. The rainbow nation, South Africa's software, had maybe been more inept than others, or it had paid too much attention to its bugs, and tried to amend them, whereas American culture could be seen as the most widespread software after industrialization, and likely the most efficient, but it was headed towards the destruction of the hardware, the planet itself, as well as chewing its own coding. If this occurred with the mind, then what was happening with our bodies? I had hardly used my ARV's since I'd fallen sick those years ago. In parts of Africa, there had been reports of women who'd developed a natural immunity to the virus. Maybe HIV was a purge, I had now begun to think, analogous to the collapse of the world's chief financial system and the earth's disintegration, a brutal transition on the other side of which lay a newer human species, one resistant to a thousand more ailments and vital enough to survive after humanity had collapsed its legacies and retracted the impetus from modernity in order to start again from the beginning with something else. The new human species would need strength. The dream of something going forward, of a future, itself a projection and a repetition of what was passed, and for a long time a fuel, had to die. Life was a performance and memory, an obedient recital to appease the speculations left to us by those who

passed from it and never sent word back to validate or disprove. We had to dance on our own and in the meantime, technologization, the dependency we had on dwindling fossil fuels, as well as the obsolete nature of more and more media forms with our essence, all indicated towards the temporary nature of human culture, and an impetus towards leaving nothing so we could reset and try again from the beginning. Our contemporary culture had been steeped inside its suicide for years, and I realized now, that having no media would've brought the world closer to the actualization of what it needed to be, but this would also be a world in which my friends and I would've been estranged. In bed, I heave as I feel my stomach fold.

In guess this is how things are meant to be for me.

I want to take a shit and I can't.

I'm gatvol as my fellow citizens would say.

I get up and walk to the kitchen for water.

Eventually, I manage to get in about two hours sleep.

Then I text Lini, asking if I should bring her something.

I'll have to give most of my belongings away.

There's no reply for a full minute.

So I turn my computer on, and after a while, I get up from my desk and walk over to the lav to take a leak. I take a look at myself in the smudged bathroom mirror. You've never been happy here, I say, to the reflection looking tired in the glass. You were only happy when you smothered yourself with others. Then I light a cigarette and start to do the dishes, but my hands start trembling, again, so I drain the water and make a cup of tea, instead. I sit back at my desk and open Twitter and Blogger. I write, my hands are trembling, and then tweet about it. I write, I'm listening to Broken Social Scene, and then tweet about it. Then I minimize Twitter and open Blogger to the draft of a

post I wrote more than a week ago. I read through the blog post, again.

Last night I astral projected and went through three more loops than is usual for me. The first one is forgotten, which is a common case. The second one took place at a party somewhere. I met some people I met two weeks ago and they had different haircuts. No one seemed impressed by my ability to fly for short amounts of time or jump really high. Fear is what inhibits this ability. It makes the loop even more unstable. Things change around a lot and you have memory lapses. Trying to keep the loop or flying at bay has the same feeling of trying to stay awake when extremely tired and half asleep. I was an artist and met these two other artists. I didn't get a chance to tell the first one what I was doing, but she asked me about the other one. I was taken aback as they've never met, but I figured I must've talked about him to her at some point. I met the guy just after that and told him what I was doing. He held my face and looked at my eyes and said, yes, it's true, you're dreaming. He was impressed. He talked about it a lot. This made me too aware of the unreality of the loop and my self-awareness in it raised my fear and anxiety. The loop then disintegrated. I found myself in the 1930's in the American South. A man in Snoopy costume walked out of the back of my father's house and I followed him until he dug a hole and disappeared. Through tree branches, I saw him walking down the street. I was too weak to project a view of him from the street. I was aware of dreaming and being weak. I tested myself by jumping over a heap of sharp rocks and had a memory lapse at the beginning of a sensation upon what

could or could not have been landing. I tried desperately to pull a spider towards me using kinetic energy. It moved, but could've been the wind. Eventually, I pulled it really far towards me and heard a voice telling me it's fine, I can still do it. I felt relief, but at the same time fear because I wouldn't be able to do it again. As I walked back to the front of the house I was struck by the nightmare of being in what you know is a dream, but with no powers, a highly fragmented memory, and a very unstable and amorphous reality. I thought maybe this was what schizophrenia is. I didn't remember having taken off my shirt, but was topless. I found the shirt at the front of the house, picked it up and felt a desperate need to leave this loop. Like my last ones always, it offered itself as reality. Could not will myself to wake up and began to panic, but as I turned around with my tee shirt, that's when I woke up to now, in bed, my heart beating fast. Before my eyes opened I recognized this as reality because of a leaden sense of weariness, which is how I think our bodies recognize this Earth's gravitational field. Loops also work on body memory, rather than the cerebral cortex. Feeling returned, I woke up to find everything in place, and realized that another characterizing effect of being awake is having different solid and linear time frames, or histories, about you, and things around you, and in this way, you remember them through their narratives.

My blog has no audience and I've never shared a link for the goal of attaining one. On the screen, now, I scroll back up and click on the publish button to send off the draft. Then my intercom starts going off behind me and I walk up to the receiver, stubbing my toe on the way to the door. I can't stand the sound it makes, and on the line, there's this guy, he's from the courier's and he's telling me there's a delivery



downstairs. I tell him I'll be right down. I put on a pair of slops, walk out the door, and as I'm turning the key, I get a text from Lini saying I don't have to bring anything back to West Ridge. She tells me they just got up half an hour ago with Carmichael and that they're waiting for a taxi on main road. Lini says Carmichael's walking her to work. So I text back saying, alright, and that by the way, I think I just got the pill package. Lini says to come meet the two of them down in Mowbray with the box of ARV's. I'm not going in today, she says to me, I'll just tell Alice that I'm taking my leave.

So I text her back, saying okay.

Then I meet the deliveryman downstairs.

He's this old guy, Shona, he tells me, and I nod.

He's Zimbabwean like Carmichael is.

He gives me a pen to sign with and I scrawl my name on a page over his cracked clipboard. Then I take the box back upstairs, drop it on my bed, and take off my clothes. I try to do push-ups on the concrete floor, but stop when I reach the number eleven, feeling my heart race, and my muscles sighing and withering away from my skeleton. Then I take a shower. The water comes out warm, and more than once, I hear the copper pipes groaning like they're being pulled apart at the ends. I close my eyes and listen to the water smacking the tiles between my toes. I try to disappear into the patter until the water runs cold on my skin. This will be my last shower, here, I think to myself. Then I look at my cell phone lying on the basin and almost laugh with relief. I feel strange in how I'm no longer afraid.

**Twenty minutes later**, I meet up with Carmichael and Lini outside Lini's place of work, a day care centre just off Bridge Street in Mowbray, and when I catch up with them, Lini tells me her boss, this blond woman named Lauren, approved of her leave, and that she has two weeks off for her break. They've also hired a new girl, Lini tells us, her name's Siviwe, and Lauren says she can make up for the gap. I tell the two of them, Carmichael and Linireaux, that I have the pills in my bag. So we buy bottled water at the nearby KFC and break a stem of qhat in a rounded corner table. Then we take one of the taxis coming from Wynberg and head out to town.

**Forty minutes later we reach the taxi rank.** I tell my two friends about my uncle Bhut' Vuyo, and how he's got this hare brained idea to see me, today. I say it slowly, to make the two of them laugh, and I don't mention how I've made no plans of returning. I show them the message on my cell phone and Carmichael and Lini nod. They're in town to get Carmichael's things from his uncle's firm, and so when our driver banks into the bay marked for Wynberg, the three of us walk out of the taxi, passed a few Cell C containers, and into Cape Town Station. We find the new public restrooms, each smelling like a heap of faeces coated in Madubula, and Lini waits outside while Carmichael and I take the last stall inside the men's. We split the package of ARV's between us and then flush the water over more water. Then the boom of the train announcer wraps around my head as we walk out, and for a moment, everyone on the buffed floor seems to stop and glance up at us with knowing. It doesn't matter at this point, does it?

**We say goodbye on Adderley Street.** Carmichael and Lini cross over to the Absa building, while I walk up towards the Grand Parade. The sun feels noncommittal in its bond to our planet, today, spilling out its light as grey as bath water. On Strand, I cut through the bus depot, skipping in front of a Golden Arrow bus that grunts towards Atlantis, and then, further down, I walk passed a vegetable stall, a hair tent, and a medicine stand with large pale bulbs and jars of krakrayo. I climb up the steel staircase that leads into the taxi rank. It's the longer route, and I've decided to take because it allows me to take down a cigarette on the way. So I buy my third filter on the platform, a Stuyve red from this wrinkled woman in a blue doek. She sells Cadburys and flavoured water, has airtime, and next to her, a muscular man in shades and a pea coat leans up against a sooted column, holding up a hot BlackBerry phone. It's still on and he's hawking it for a grand. I pay and walk passed them, looking for a taxi headed to the West Coast, either to Du Noon or to Table View, since it never makes a difference to me. Soon I find one headed for Parklands, a new Table View Quantum, and settle myself at the back seat, my head leaning up against the window. I take out my cell phone and wait for the passengers to fill up. It usually takes a while, and eventually, I watch as a girl in green school uniform and red tinted hair takes the seat in front of me. I hear the music thumping her skull from her headphones, a man named Shota, famous for taking his shirt off for women in photos. We never sleep, he laments into her orange skull as the Quantum grumbles into life around us. We never sleep, I hear him say again, when we start out of the taxi

rank, and pass the vendors of Nik Naks and Nollywood sagas, squeezing ourselves between more taxis streaming in from up in Victoria Road. We never sleep, I hear him say for the last time, as we drive into Christiaan Barnard Street, and the roof of the Good Hope Centre rises like a dull and blind observatory on our left.

**I guess I was never cut out to be a journalist, LT.** During my second year at university, I took an assignment to interview a pop star as part of my final term project. You weren't alive, back then, but it was with a man who formed part of what was being hailed as a revival in indigenous Venda music, and I wanted to ask him about its representation in the papers. I found the coverage of the band exploitative, and from the beginning, my saying so didn't go down well with the singer. We fumbled our way through the introduction of my angle, before he caught on that I wasn't altogether suited to be given his time. He looked at his wristwatch and asked for my age. It was clear that I had no inclination towards his music and perhaps no inclination towards music at all. No soul, he later improvised, when we were loosened up by the first round. I followed his gaze to the main road. It was a bright, sunny Tuesday afternoon. Cars were driving passed with their windows down, hurling snatches of summer anthems into the air. We were sitting in a cafe in Rondebosch, full of North Americans, caffeine and buzzing Wi-Fi connections. Our second drinks had just arrived and the alcohol was starting to touch my head. I felt my interest piqued at the mention of metaphysics. So I asked him if the soul was important to Venda culture and if he knew anyone else like me who didn't have one. He looked across the table

at me with a combination of irritation and I guess disgust. I thought he would get up and walk out that very instant, but when I offered him another drink, he accepted. He sat still. We had the third round in silence and later, outside the cafe, we shook hands and I gave him directions to the V&A Waterfront, where he wanted to buy clothes from a Fabiani and Gap dealer. We parted after that. I walked back up to my res and later, I found out I hadn't even managed to switch on my recorder for the interview. In bed, later that week, I couldn't recall any of his songs by name, and then I decided to deregister from my degree that following Friday. This is not how I was meant to meet the world. The curriculum advisor, a loud, jovial American man who wore glasses and a white pony tail, asked me to state my reasons. I told him I liked reading, but had no interest in writing. I wanted a career without people skills, I joked. He looked at a copy of my matric results, they were pulled out from a time I'd spent in a stern boarding school to the east of the country, where there was nothing else to do but study, and he shouted, science.

**Our driver shifts his stick down and changes lanes towards Civic.** We pass Old Marine Drive before we swerve into an Engen to fill up on gas. These two petrol attendants walk up to the driver and shake his hand with eagerness. Ta T-Man, both of them say, hoezet, grootman? I manage to watch them talking for a while. The driver pats each of them with a ten rand note, and then I get a text from Lini telling me Carmichael managed to avoid his uncle at the firm. He got his things together and now they've set up at a cafe on upper Long. They've dosed on physeptone, she says, and they have no idea

where to start looking for Ethelia. Then Lini sends me another text, after that, and she asks if I have any ideas about what to do? I tell them to keep some of the methadone for me. It comes to me that I might never see them, again.

**What do I remember about my friends?** The good times, of course, and that's even when they weren't given to us, that way. I remember those about my two friends, Linireaux and Carmichael.

**I remember how Carmichael began to vomit** and wouldn't stop even after an hour of heaving on his bathroom floor, for example. We were at his place, on Beach Road in Seapoint, and he'd had another threat from his uncle and received another letter from the bank, and after work, by the time Lini and I had made it over to him, he'd been drinking Gibsons at this bar just down the road from his building. So we tried to catch up with him as soon as we could, sometimes ordering two drinks at a time for ourselves, but then all three of us soon ran out of money to spend, and that was that.

Lini and I didn't make much, back then.

So we patted ourselves a few times and came out flat.

Then we started back up for his place.

Outside, Carmichael began to laugh as he lit up a cigarette. He waved his hand to cover the panorama of the beach, and then

inwards across the promenade, and then onto the passing traffic. It was early evening, and the sky was tinted a furious, burning pink, with a wavering streak of cirrus clouds smudged over the horizon, and the street lights were only beginning to flicker on, and intermittently, too, as if aroused from a deep sleep or malfunction by our heartbeats. Carmichael hadn't talked about his uncle, that day, and I guess Lini and I knew he wouldn't, either way. We were quiet as the cars raced passed us, seeming as they did like anonymous, wind pushed machines, and just as a play of light obscured the faces of their drivers, I imagined them to be headed either towards Camps Bay for sun downers or Greenpoint, and then onward to the CBD where they would join a jammed highway and screech a path onto the Southern Suburbs or the West Coast. In any case, the way we walked, that night, the three of us together, Lini and I had to have Carmichael propped up between the two of us. We passed our first cigarette quickly and lit up another one. Then another followed after that. Then soon after, Carmichael pointed us left towards his flat. Carmichael's place had all of its windows opened wide at the time, with most of the glass pushed out almost to the hilt of the window sashes, and he'd given us a specific instruction to leave them open that way. So after taking the lift up, Lini and I closed the door behind us and Carmichael said that sometimes the windows being left ajar, they could make the apartment seem like a moving structure, as if, sitting alone inside his living room, and at the helm of his glass topped coffee table, he was in control of something large and industrial, as if by his efforts alone, he could lift the building up and manoeuvre it across the coastline, which he confessed to me and Lini was something he often did. There were windows on two of the walls in the living room and they both looked out and over the vista of the Atlantic Ocean. When I sat down on one of Carmichael's bean

bags, that night, the walls seemed to stand up in my stead, the windows sliding down and hazily off the bricks like pepperoni discs on a greasy pizza slice. The sound of the traffic, the sound of the promenade, and the sound of the ocean all reached into the living room and mingled with the noises of Carmichael and Lini looking for thinner inside the kitchen cabinets. The windows slowly readjusted themselves on the walls and even when I blinked my eyes, again, closing them for even longer intervals, this time around, my head had the feeling of being steered into tiny, concentric circles. I laid it back on the bean bag and watched my two friends from an inverted perspective, their frames slightly elongated and undulating in, and their feet standing where their chins should've been. Carmichael's hands shot down to his mouth and he pushed himself back from the counter, and for a moment, Linireaux and I did nothing but stare at his absence. Then we followed after him to the bathroom. There we found his fig trees, inside the tub, small potted plants he'd splattered with his blood in order to spread himself to the world through the birds that ate them.

**I won't forget** that.

**I also won't forget** that it was my fear that killed my younger brother, Luthando. The first time LT and I saw people having sex it was from a view of my white neighbours' bedroom. We both had our turn with



girls after that and I had a few more than LT before he turned to a boy in his neighbourhood. You'll remember it better than I would, wouldn't you, LT, although I doubt by a very wide margin. I was scared to go home for circumcision when they started those whispers about you. When the Mda house had been pressured to make a man out of one of its sissy sons I crossed my arms in Cape Town. Younger than me and he believed none of it, LT called to ask for my advice. I told him to go in June, and that I would follow as soon as I handed in my assignment. I never went back. I switched off my phone a week later, and abandoned you up there. You fought them and it's what killed you. Now my arms are still crossed in Cape Town.

**The year after I graduated Tech**, and a week before the sixth anniversary of your death, Luthando, I infected myself with HIV in the laboratories. That's how I became a reactive. I never had the reactions I needed to give myself and could not react to you when you called me for help. So I gave my body a situation it couldn't run away from. So here's your older brother and murderer, Luthando. His name is Lindanathi and his parents got it from a girl.

## Third Part

**It takes us less than an hour to reach Du Noon.** Even with their three children, Bhut' Vuyo and his wife have spent the last eight years building a home inside a shipping container. This isn't an unusual choice in Du Noon. The containers have multiplied since my last stay. I see them on the taxi as we drive in, the hair salons, eateries and phone-shops, all of them packaged inside the steel boxes like time-capsules. Ta-T-Man sticks in a usb full of house mp3s as we drive in, and I can't keep from peering into the dim insides of the containers. It feels like seeing regular poverty, only this time excerpted for export. In front of them, lined like machine sentries, stand portable toilets stooping under the slanting sunlight, and of these, four of them are shared across every dozen containers. It's supposedly a temporary measure, meant to hold the people over until the results of an upcoming local election. The container I'm meant to travel to is red, corrugated and a source of concern for its owner. It's easy to tell that it's old and falling apart. Bhut' Vuyo spends each day painstakingly extending it with sheets of discarded zinc, sometimes driving his lorry to the coast of Blouberg where he scours the shore for bits of plank wood, and anything he can find that isn't too rotted from the tides. On more than a single occasion he's had to deal with the sailors who throw this refuse overboard, men whose nature he finds mercenary and wicked. Bhut' Vuyo is a large and laughing man, mostly, but if you get close enough to him, it isn't hard to tell that he's walked into places that surprised him with buckets of blood. It's like that with most of the people, here.

**I arrive at the corner of Bhengu Street just after three 'o clock.**

It's a weekday and quieter than usual. I spot a makeshift pit-latrine leaning precariously to the side of their home. The clouds have allowed the sun free reign, and its light slams brilliantly into the ribbed metal, the earth still muddy at the base, with spikes of chopped plank exposed. There's a cloud of flies that hovers lazily about the work. I find Bhut' Vuyo sitting on a crate in front of his container. He observes his work with a quart between his ankles. His beer belly flows over his thighs and the sweat on his head sparkles, catching the light. You can tell by the way he looks at the tin that it's a fresh triumph. He's sweaty and lively when he sees me. When he extends his hand, it isn't to shake my own, but to draw me into an embrace. Welcome home, he says, warmly. I smile, not sure what else to say.

**The first day at my uncle Vuyo's place** comes and goes without consequence. He doesn't say anything about his message. I help him with the pit-latrine, which caves in shortly after my arrival, and for supper, he fries us beef livers and onions, which he dishes generously with pap and bread crusts. I wash the dishes from a yellow bucket, and then afterwards, I unroll umkhukhu on the plastic tiles. We share a Courtleigh and he tells me how his wife has taken the children to visit her parents in Langa. Outside, the township comes to life with the pulse of the night. I watch the smoke hovering around the mountain of my uncle on his bed. There are indications that parts of him still belong out there. He says we'll talk after her return and I nod. I open the door to flick out the cigarette stub. I stare

with surprise at how close the full moon appears to the township. Inside, Bhut' Vuyo blows out the candle and I coil myself inside a blanket and a towel. Soon the container fills up with the sound of his laboured breaths. I trip into unsettled dreams after him.

**The next two days pass just as quietly.** Bhut' Vuyo leaves for Blouberg while I sleep on his floor. I don't see him until the evening, when we cook and sit for our supper and a beer. He prepares dumplings and then samp. He promises to keep us chin deep in meat, this week. During meals he keeps me abreast on who comes and goes in the community. I recognize Ta-T-Man, the taxi driver, from one of his faster stories. He shows me a scar on his forearm. Him and his men were trying to introduce a nyaope cartel in the neighbourhood, he tells me, but the Cape seems uninterested in the drug. I get close to telling him about my ARV's, but decide against it. I have an idea he still thinks I'm a scholar. During the day, when Bhut' Vuyo disappears, I take Industrial and lie on the floor to read, or just listen to the sounds of the neighbourhood with my eyes closed. He buys the Daily Voice, which he uses to wallpaper the container after reading. Lying on the floor, I read about gangs spraying bullets across the streets of Lavender Hill, before I glide over to community members in Delft, where the women have started to mark tik houses with large X's on their garages. The rest of Cape Town starts to feel distant under these spreads, surrounded by haziness and receding into memory. I run out of airtime and decide to go without. I spend more time listening to the noise of what Du Noon has to say to me.

**On Saturday, Bhut' Vuyo and I finish up the latrine.** His added supplies make our job go faster. We work hastily, barely passing a word between us, and get done in just under three hours. Every time I lay a plank down, I feel myself filling up with relief and gratitude, ever more thankful for the spade work I missed before my arrival. Digging the hole must've been a fortnight's work, at the very least, and I'm careful not to bring this up with my uncle. Since my stay, I've discovered that Bhut' Vuyo's latrine is more of a gesture than a need for his family. It's a political project, and in reality, a lot less functional than the toilets that insult him on the street. The residents on his block have developed an efficient sharing system with the port-a-loos, and when Bhut' Vuyo leaves for Blouberg, I try one out and take a shit. The formaldehyde has turned a brownish green, meaning it's stopped neutralizing the odour. It smells like the combined waste of eight households and I hold my breath as much as I can before giving up. It's in a public toilet. I rub one of Bhut' Vuyo's papers between my knuckles and wipe myself. I've been told by the neighbours that my uncle's family makes use of them, too, and that he's a fool for putting up this zinc wreck in his yard. I listen to this with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, even as I nod often. No one else seems to bother even with gestures.

I mean, that should count for something.

They should be burned.

This is what Bhut' Vuyo says to me, now.

We share a quart outside the container, standing and facing out to Bhengu Street, as the two of us wait for water. I follow his gaze to the portable toilets lining the narrow road. They have two for every

block, the blue and grey plastic built wide and tall. Even from where I'm standing, you can see marks and defacements on the one. Like Bhut' Vuyo wants, someone has held a fire to it.

They must've given up.

We aren't wealthy people, Nathi, he says, you know that.

So I nod.

Then we cross the road to the communal faucet situated on a concrete square, inside a barren field. Goal posts have been erected out of carved branches on each end, but no one has any interest in playing games in Du Noon. Bhut' Vuyo lets the water run into a bucket and we go back to the house and pour Omo washing powder onto our palms. When we sit down and face out on the street again, another woman has occupied the tap with an enamel vaskom. Two small children hang on her legs and she kicks them away, scolding. They laugh and run towards the goal posts. The water feels cool in the heat. Bhut' Vuyo says the Sunlight Soap is only used for washing our bodies, and so we scoop up more washing powder for our palms.

They should be burned, he repeats, and fidgets on his crate.

We aren't wealthy, but we aren't prisoners, Bhut' Vuyo says.

I dry my hands against my pants.

It smells like a clothesline under my fingernails.

I know things can be worse, Bhut' Vuyo says to me. In Khayelitsha, the toilets don't have walls. This is a place a man's wife must relieve herself in. There, with all men and children watching.

So he spits, right then.

In town, Carmichael once told us about an artist called Monica Bovinci, who'd created a portable toilet surrounded by four one way mirrors. This woman, she'd installed it on a pavement in London, opposite the Tate Britain Gallery, and when the walls reflected on the outside, the person on the bowl could see out into

the traffic. I guess Lini would've called that the collective unconscious. The woman hadn't given any indication of having ever heard of Khayelitsha. I doubt Bhut' Vuyo would find any of this amusing, though, and so I decide to stop thinking about it. I remember Ta Dennis and the charlatan poisoning his wife.

I take a look around.

Despite the temperament of the conversation with my uncle, Du Noon is filled with warmth and sunshine, today. It's a Saturday, which means the rote is mild, and the commute halved. Taxis play loud house music as they wheel about, picking up passengers dressed in their best and gaudiest Saturday clothes. The women have their figures fit snugly into white slim jeans and they've sprayed their weaves, which make them gleam under the morning sun. Even from a distance, you can tell they smell like rainforests. Not expensively, but pleasant. Their lips are painted red and sometimes hot pink, and there's this confidence that radiates from them. They stroll defiantly towards a taxi if it doesn't stop at their feet, and I turn to Bhut' Vuyo as one of them spits gum on the tar.

I say, at least people are still alive, here.

I must sound bored or unconvinced by myself.

Most likely it's both, since Bhut' Vuyo only laughs.

The laugh itself sounds sparse and cold.

I can't trace the humour in the eyes or the enjoyment around the mouth, but thankfully, it's a noise that passes over us quickly. My uncle claps his hands together. That's not living, he says to me stiffly. Then he looks at my face and smiles. He pats the side of my leg. Tell me about your studies, he says. Tell me about life at the university. One day you're going to change all of this, aren't you? He lets out another laugh. He says, you and your whites.



**Sis' Nosizi, Bhut' Vuyo's wife**, returns to us in Du Noon on the Sunday, just a day after we finish up with the latrine. She only has the two older children with her, and in the middle of the afternoon, Bhut' Vuyo arrives early from his work in Blouberg. In preparation for her arrival, we do what we can for the container. I put up more Daily Voice spreads on the walls, more shootings and tik dens, and replace the ones I wiped with and soaked in the pools of formaldehyde. For his part, Bhut' Vuyo drives back with two packs of beef shankles. He rips the plastic between his teeth and whistles as he rinses them in the bucket. I cut a square of Holsum and watch it melt over the frying pan. The Primus is broken, parked outside by the crates, and so we use a gas two plate for cooking. Bhut' Vuyo busies himself with his specialty.

There is a reason I called you, here, Nathi, he says to me.

So I listen to him.

My wife, he says. You mustn't be scared.

I know Sis' Nosizi's a diviner.

It doesn't intimidate me.

I look forward to hearing her stories.

Then Bhut' Vuyo changes his tone and licks his fingers.

He fluits over the pan as he reaches for the salt shaker.

Pass me the stock, he tells me. You know nothing, my boy.

We laugh and prepare just enough for us to eat.

When Sis' Nosiziwe returns she looks at me for a long time.

Then she embraces me and tears fall down both our throats.

**My circumcision** is discussed only once. We set a date for December. I will go in with their eldest son, Luvuyo. We're set to meet in two months.

**Sometimes I still hear from Sis' Thobeka.** I finally gave her that CD4 count sheet if you'll believe me. They say the virus is arrested in my blood, and that my antibodies are the beginning of a medical miracle. I'm not the only one. Cases with my results have been showing up all over Africa, and there's now an article about it written in the City Press. Sis' Thobeka encourages me to go in for tests and one of these days, I think I'll surprise myself and do that.

**Just pull me away from Zukiswa first.** I know I haven't mentioned a single thing about her, yet, but here's how all of that goes. The two of us, me and Zukiswa, we meet on a clear and hot day somewhere towards the end of December. The way it happens is that I've just borrowed my uncle's lorry and driven it out to a park jam in Khayelitsha, there's a new gig they've put on outside Mandela Park, there, on the corner of Oscar Mpetha and Govan Mbeki. It goes on for about half a day or so of music in front of the stop-nonsense. I turn a corner and spot the white Pick 'n Pay bags which clutch the barbed wire like the flags of a different country, here, twisting their bodies to the tune of decades of township neglect. Closer, I feel the bass come off the PA system and murmur against my window panes,

and then I pull in with the lorry, shift down a gear, and park just off the gathering before I walk to a nearby spaza and return to nurse a warm six pack of lagers between my knees. I meet Zukiswa when I close the door behind me and take out a Stuyve to suck in with the beer. She's on her own, the way Zukiswa will always keep herself that way, and she has this canvass backpack loosely holding her bright brown shoulders. When our eyes meet, we both refuse to move them away from the stranger in our way, and so we stay like this for the seconds leading up to a minute, as close as forehead to forehead, but from across the backs of the laities who gather around here, picking discarded chicken bones off the tar, and over the canopies of these two busted up Fords.

Eventually, she walks up to me and asks for a skyf.

So I exhale and stamp out the one I've got.

Then I oblige her and the two of us light up a Stuyve each.

I've let my hair grow.

It's the first thing she takes a pick at and points at her own.

You're one of those guys aren't you, she says to me.

Her grin shows only half itself behind the pale smoke.

She says, you grow your hair out but stand first in line for meat at the bash.

She says, okay, I see.

Then she turns around and shows me the other half of her smile. She tells me, so what's your deal, my brother?

Then this is Zukiswa entering my life.

What's your deal, my brother?

She'll ask me this often.

These days, I don't think about Last Life as much as I used to, but I think about the things I'll remember when it's time for me to eventually leave this place.

I think of Zukiswa's flesh a lot.

I think of the sticky underside of her breasts when I lift them to my face in the middle of summer. I think of the smell of burning wood, and of Zukiswa's last name, Grootboom, that her grandmother took to pass them off as coloureds in '78. I think of our hair, the way the smell of coal still lingers on our necks and up our heads an entire day after sitting on the dirty benches of a chesa nyama. I think of all the sticky vinyl under the J&B ashtrays we use at the tavern we pass.

I want you to fuck me like a new man, she says to me, once.

She's standing behind me in the kitchen, looking for a lighter.

I'm on my feet trying to tune in a new station into her old set.

She lives in a two-room with her aunt in Slovo.

Her mother's stationed across the country and aging there. For most of her life, it hasn't been much different from this. First there were nightshifts at a Grey Hospital in King William's Town, and then a move to Fort Beaufort, and then Grahamstown, and now she's moored in Stutterheim, where her sleeves stay rolled up in wards full of the wailing and dying. In any case, neither of them is around enough to see what we do on their floors, here. So I guess it's just as well that my shirt and her panties already lie in the fruit bowl on the living room table.

I stretch.

Then I get up from the TV set.

I've been back about a week from my initiation eMthatha.

I went over to Luthando's grave when my family was finally done with me. It was a clear day and I didn't say much to him down there. Sometimes we never had to use words for us to discover an understanding between us. I guess a lot has happened, hasn't it? I waved on my way out, and I said later Luthando, and that's about all.

Later, Luthando.

Now I lie on Zukiswa's cold kitchen floor.

I disclosed my status to her just a day after we met and we've worshiped at the altar of her caution ever since. I watch her now as she looks at the inflated flesh around the tip of my penis. She handles me with care between her long, thin fingers, the nails tickling my underside like the tip of an ivy leaf. Then she pushes her teeth into me and puts a hand on my chest when I begin to stir. For a long moment I lie there, on the brink of a scream, and I feel surprised when this pain passes. On her knees on the kitchen floor, she releases me, grips my scrotum and squeezes it, and I melt and empty myself between her teeth. Later, I fall asleep to the feel of her salt water drying into my face. Sleeping beside me, Zukiswa breathes her air out as hot as a furnace and I close my eyes but this time, unlike so many others I've had in my life, I don't clench them.

**Bhut' Vuyo never explicitly reminds me** of my promise, but I remember and live through it each day. My promise, what I told them then is the same thing I'll tell you now. My name, my parents got it from a girl, and what it is is Lindanathi. It means wait with us and this is what I plan on doing. My fear helped in killing the only little brother I had, but for as long as I'm still here, for as long as I'm still able to bare and bear it, I plan on getting myself stronger. Not alone, either, I plan on doing it together with everyone else. I plan on doing it even if it takes all of us a little time.